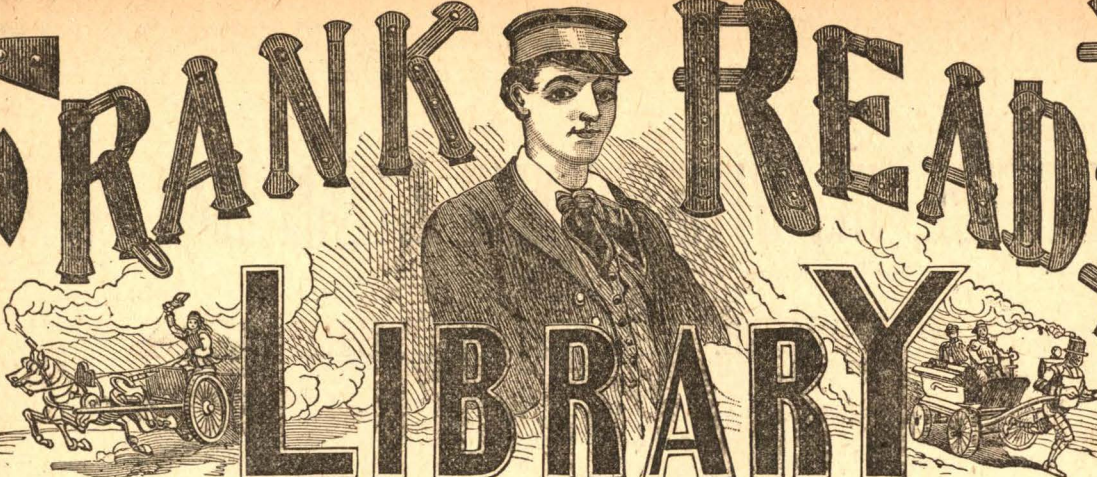


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Vol. I

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Frank Reade, Jr.,

With His New Steam Man in Mexico; or,
HOT WORK AMONG THE GREASERS.

By "NONAME."



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FRANK READE, JR., WITH HIS NEW STEAM MAN IN MEXICO;

OR, HOT WORK AMONG THE GREASERS.

By "NONAME,"

Author of "Frank Reade, Jr., With His New Steam Man in Texas; or, Chasing the Train Robbers," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

KIDNAPPED BY GREASERS.

* FRANK READE, JR., the inventor of many wonderful machines and whose fame was world wide, sat in his study one day in September looking over a heap of mail matter which the servant had just brought in.

He was a handsome dark complexioned young man with a distinctive air and that individuality of appearance which stamps the man of genius.

Frank's father was a famous inventor before him.

Foremost among Frank Reade, Jr.'s inventions was the New Steam Man, a machine of truly wonderful character.

We will not attempt a description of the Steam Man for certain good reasons until later; first let us give our attention for the moment to the young inventor.

Frank Reade, Jr., was naturally the foremost man in Readestown, a respectable sized and thriving town, founded by and named after the Reades.

Here they had built the wonderful machine shops for the construction of their own machines.

These employed many of the most skilled workers in wood and steel.

Money was not a scarcity with the Reades nor was it ever likely to be, with their superlative genius to make it.

Frank opened one letter after another, hastily read them and placed those on a file which he meant to answer.

Some of them were of importance, some were not, but he encountered none which claimed his attention greatly for some while.

Then a letter lay before him, superscribed in a foreign style, and bearing the stamp and postmark of Mexico.

He opened it with a curious premonition of its importance.

The letter was written in Spanish, but Frank knew the language well, so he read it easily.

Thus it read:

"SEÑOR READE—Pardon me for addressing you, a stranger, but I am impelled to lay before you a matter of the utmost moment. A gentleman from New York has been sojourning in the city of Laredo for the past year, being interested in a certain mining claim in Los Pueblos Mountains, five hundred miles from here, in the interior of Mexico.

"He has busied himself contracting for men and material to dig a shaft and open a rich gold mine upon his claim. He is a gentleman of means, and I am told a former acquaintance of yours. His name is Harvey Montaine."

"Harvey Montaine!" repeated Frank. "Indeed, he is a dear friend of mine."

However, the young inventor continued reading the letter.

"This gentleman has made many friends here in Laredo. Both the Spanish people and the natives like him for his courtly manners and his generous heart.

"But his efforts to open up the Los Pueblos claim have been attended with ill-fortune. It seems that his first expedition was set upon by bandits who infest the region, and who are under the command of Miguel Costello, a noted desperado.

"His men were slaughtered, and he escaped himself by a narrow chance. But Señor Montaine is a gentleman of pluck, and he once more began to plan an excursion to Los Pueblos, when one morning he disappeared.

"From that day to this he has never been seen. A notice has been posted in Laredo, signed by Costello, calling for a reward of ten thousand dollars, or Montaine will be slain.

"This reward, or ransom money, was quickly raised here among Señor Montaine's friends, but the bandit promptly raised the figures to fifty thousand.

"This money cannot be raised, nor is it believed that Costello would release his prisoner for it.

"It is believed by many that this is a subterfuge employed by the bandit to cover his purpose of working the Los Pueblos claim himself!

"It is rumored that he has a large gang of men at work at the mine, and that they are sinking a shaft.

"It may be readily understood that this is a dishonest trick of the villain's, and the sense of justice of every good man must be aroused. Meanwhile, a deserter from Miguel's band brings us the story, also a request from Montaine, who begs us to write you to come to his relief with your New Steam Man. We are obeying the dictates of Señor Montaine in writing this letter.

"That you may best follow your own conclusion in granting your friend's request, we have no doubt that you will appreciate fully his extreme peril.

"This is the case, and in laying it before you, dear señor, we believe that we are but doing our duty as Christian gentlemen. Your answer and decision we await with some impatience and much hope. I have the honor, señor, to faithfully subscribe myself yours,

"JOSE RAVELLO.

"Hotel San Juan, Laredo, Mexico."

Frank read the letter through carefully. Then he leaned back in his chair.

There was a strange excited light in his fine eyes, and he exclaimed in a musical, but tense voice:

"Poor Montaine! He is one of my best friends. So he is in trouble, eh? Well, I would be inhuman indeed not to respond to his appeal."

Frank sprang up and put on his hat.

As he left the study he met a colored man in the hall. He was a fat, jolly little ducky, and as black as the ace of spades.

"Pomp," said Frank, sharply.

"What am it, sah?"

"I want you to go with me."

"A'right, sah."

The ducky followed Frank out of the fine mansion and down to the street.

A few minutes' walk brought them to the gates of the machine shop yard.

Here they met a jolly-looking Irishman, whose twinkling eyes and broad mug stamped him a genuine son of the Green Isle.

"Barney O'Shea!" said Frank, sharply, "I want you to come with me."

"All roight, sor!" exclaimed Barney, with great readiness.

The negro and the Irishman were old servitors of Frank Reade, Jr. They had been in the employ of his father before him, and Frank would never have thought of going upon a trip without them.

Their services were invaluable. Barney being a first-class engineer and steel workman, and Pomp was a fine cook.

Passing through the yard which was filled with workmen, Frank led the way into a private office.

It was here that the plans of all his wonderful machines were draughted in secret.

Frank sat down at a table and threw Señor Ravello's letter upon it.

"Pomp," he said, tersely, "get me a map of Mexico."

"A'right, sah."

Wondering much what was coming, the ducky quickly obeyed.

The map was spread upon the table.

Frank quickly placed his finger upon Laredo. Then he traversed the interior of Mexico to the Los Pueblos Mountains.

"That is it," he said, theoretically. "It is a long trip, but it can be done."

Then he turned to Barney:

"Barney," he asked, sharply, "has that new gauge been put upon the Steam Man?"

"Yis, sor," replied the Celt.

"Good! Is the machine all right every other way?"

"I think so, sor."

"All right. Now sit down and let me read you this letter."

The two men sank into chairs and Frank read them the letter from Ravello.

They listened with the deepest interest, and when Frank finished Barney cried eagerly:

"Bad cess to the omadhouns! Shure ye'll go afther them, Misther Frank?"

"Golly, I jes' hopes yo' will, Marse Frank. Dis chille am in it fo' suah."

"Then you are ready and willing to go?" asked Frank.

"Yo' kin jest bet."

"Yez are roight we are."

"Of course my sympathies for Montaine are strong," said Frank; "he is an old and very dear friend of mine."

"Shure, yez oughter go to his help," averred Barney.

"Well, I will consider the situation. Let us take a look at the Steam Man."

All three arose and went into an inner chamber of the factory.

This was a large, high-roofed room. In its center stood the wonderful invention which had made the name of Frank Reade, Jr., famous the world over.

Picture a giant man made of iron plates holding the shafts of a wagon in his hands.

The Man was made of plates of steel hinged at the ankles, knees and hips.

There were driving rods down the legs, showing that the Man's motive power was steam.

The body of the man made the furnace, and upon its back was the steam chest as well as gauge and indicator.

The tall hat was the smoke-stack, and in the Man's mouth was the whistle. A headlight was placed in the forehead.

The reservoirs of water were in the Man's legs and arms, so adjusted that a continual circulation was kept up with the water in the boiler.

Reins extended from the throttle and whistle valves in the Man's mouth to the dasher of the wagon, and it was by these that the iron monster was guided and driven with the greatest of ease.

This completes the description of the Steam Man.

The wagon was also made of plates of steel, cleverly riveted and bullet proof.

The wagon contained bunkers for coal, also compartments for the safe storage of provisions and ammunition.

Bunks to sleep in were arranged over the coal bunkers.

The wagon was covered entire with a fine netting of bullet proof steel.

In this netting there were loop-holes through which rifles could be fired at an enemy.

A door in the rear of the wagon furnished means of entrance and exit. Once inside this steel cage the inmates were safe from any sort of a missile but a cannon ball.

The Steam Man was certainly a wonderful invention. The four-wheeled wagon with its grooved tires could be hauled across level ground by him faster than the ordinary train of cars.

The Man's stride was something tremendous. Large sums had been offered Frank for the secret of his invention.

But he would not sell it for many good and sufficient reasons.

CHAPTER II.

EN ROUTE TO MEXICO.

FRANK READE, JR., made a quick but thorough examination of the Steam Man.

It required but a few moments to satisfy him that Pomp had told the truth.

The Man was all in perfect order and ready for a trip. The famous inventor was much pleased with this realization.

"Well, Barney," he said, briskly, "you may see to it that the wagon is provided with necessary stores. Pomp, you may look after the arms and ammunition and have everything in readiness at the earliest possible moment. Do you understand?"

"Ay, sor!" replied Barney.

"Yes, sah!" said Pomp.

With this Frank turned about and left the shop.

He went at once back to his house.

Here at the door he was met by his wife. Mrs. Reade was a very beautiful and intelligent woman, a fit partner for a man of genius.

"Well, Frank!" she said, with a smile, "I have a premonition that you are up to some new scheme. Am I not right?"

"You are," replied Frank, with a laugh. "You are a good guesser."

"I knew it. What—what is it?"

Frank noted the look of anxiety upon his wife's face and replied:

"You must have no fears. I am quite able to take care of myself. Yes, it is another trip."

"Oh, Frank, I so fear for your safety!"

"But you must not. With the Steam Man I am quite safe."

Mrs. Reade did not speak upon the subject further, and like the true wife that she was did not attempt to gainsay her husband's plans. Woman-like, though, she dreaded his going upon these expeditions into regions of unexplored wilderness where danger was rife.

But Frank had fully made up his mind to go to Los Pueblos.

He at once sent a messenger to Senor Ravello at Laredo.

It was to this effect:

"SENOR RAVELLO—I shall come to Laredo at an early day. Negotiate with Costello for a ransom to gain time. I shall bring the Steam Man with me, and shall try to rescue my friend Montaine."

"Yours truly,

"FRANK READE, JR."

This message was sent over the wires with all dispatch. The report spread that the Steam Man was to go upon a tour to Mexico.

At once public interest as usual was aroused.

The exploits of the young inventor and his wonderful Steam Man always claimed widespread attention.

Letters of congratulation, of inquiry, and of request began to pour in. But Frank had little time to give them heed.

He was very busy for some time fitting up the Man.

But on the fourth day after receiving the letter of Senor Ravello the Steam Man, packed securely in sections, was safely placed aboard a special train.

Frank had decided to take the Steam Man as far as Laredo by rail.

Then he would go from thence to Los Pueblos overland.

Nothing of note occurred during the trip to the Mexican frontier. A few days later after having crossed half of the continent the Rio Grande river was crossed, and the Steam Man and our voyagers were in Mexico.

Immediately upon alighting from the train Frank was met by a tall, fine-looking gentleman.

"I am Senor Ravello," he said. "I imagine that you are Senor Reade."

"I am!" replied Frank.

"I am glad to meet you."

They shook hands and conversed pleasantly for some moments.

It was an early hour in the morning, and Barney and Pomp went at once to work to take the Man from the cars.

It was unloaded in sections, and then with the aid of half a dozen skilled workmen whom Frank had brought along, it was put together.

Quite a crowd of people were at the station to witness this operation.

They were of all classes and many different nations.

Senor Ravello conversed with Frank and watched with interest the reconstruction of the Steam Man.

"Have you heard from Montaine lately?" asked Frank, casually.

"I sent word to Costello by a special messenger, asking him what ransom he would take."

"Ah!"

"He returned an evasive reply."

"Indeed!"

"I have, therefore, arrived at the conclusion perforce that he is not desirous of accepting a ransom. His game is to hold Montaine a prisoner while he works the rich Los Pueblos claim."

"Well," said Frank, drawing a deep breath, "we will try and spoil that little game for him."

"I sincerely trust you may, senor."

It required hardly three hours' work to put the Steam Man together. Then the wonderful invention was revealed in its perfection to the admiring crowd of spectators.

They burst into cheers of approval as they realized its wonderful perfection of outline and detail.

But the climax was reached when Barney started the fire in the furnace and quickly got up steam.

The Steam Man was soon puffing and panting ready to go.

Barney gave a couple of sharp blasts with the whistle.

Then Frank Reade, Jr., shook hands with Senor Ravello.

"I shall pray for your good luck," declared Ravello.

"Thank you!" replied Frank. "I shall hope to rescue Montaine."

Then he sprang into the cage.

Barney was at the dasher and Pomp was busying himself stowing away things in the bunkers.

Barney opened the throttle and the Steam Man went ahead.

The crowd yelled itself hoarse, the Steam Man whistled, and then was away with ponderous tread out of the town.

Out into the country the voyagers went. Fertile farms and gardens were upon all sides for a number of miles.

It was easy to follow good roads for some distance.

Then the confines of civilization were reached and the unexplored wilds opened up before them.

For two days the Steam Man kept a course to the north-west.

Mexican towns were passed and ranches without number. Rancheros and peons, hunters and cowboys, greasers and half-breeds, all viewed the Steam Man with great wonderment, and some of the ignorant natives with superstition.

But the voyagers were not molested until one evening, after crossing an arid plain, the startling discovery was made that the Steam Man's boilers were empty.

It was necessary to bank the fires at once and look for a fresh supply.

This it was not easy to find in that locality.

There was not a stream or lake visible anywhere. All was a dry, arid plain.

But two miles distant in the verge of a clump of timber the low roof of an adobe ranch was seen.

It was not known what sort of people lived there, nor with what sort of a reception they might meet.

But it was necessary to have water, and something desperate had got to be done at once.

"There must be water there," declared Frank. "We will go over there and see at any rate."

So Barney headed the Man for the distant ranch.

As they approached it, they saw half a score of nondescript men lounging about the place.

They were in the main half-breeds and greasers, and all of a decidedly villainous type.

The Steam Man drew up in the ranch yard. The effect upon the motley crew was most surprising.

Of course this was the first time they had ever gazed upon anything like the Steam Man.

Wonderment and interest were depicted upon their brutish faces as they advanced.

Pomp regarded them askance, and taking a sweeping survey of the place ventured to say:

"Golly! Marse Frank, I don't jes' likes de looks of dis place."

"Begorra, I'm wid yez, naygur!" cried Barney. "Av I'm not mish-taken thim omadhouns will be no frinds to us."

But Frank did not seem to share this fear.

He busied himself with adjusting the brake, and while thus engaged the greasers crowded about the Steam Man.

One of them lazily puffing a cheroot, ventured to address Frank:

"Buenos, senior! Welcome to Lone Ranch."

"Thank you!" replied Frank, politely. "Are you the ranchero?"

"Si, senior! Pray dismount and enter. I have some wine which will suit your taste."

The fellow was a tall, dark-complexioned chap, with long black mustache and eyes of keenest black.

He used good English and was very polite and affable.

Something about the fellow gave Frank a chill of distrust.

But he knew well that in his present position he was much at the mercy of the greasers.

It was impossible for the Steam Man to go further without water.

Frank saw a deep spring near and a plan was suggested to him.

After all, he had no right to distrust the Mexicans as yet.

The ranch might be a respectable place and, at any rate, if he desired to secure any of the water, Frank knew that he must work his cards diplomatically.

So he decided to affect friendship with the greasers, and trust to fortune to accomplish the rest.

"Your offer I will gladly accept," said Frank, with a flourish.

"Your excellent wine already warms my heart."

"We are always glad to welcome strangers," said the ranchero, with a peculiar smile, "but this is the first time we have ever seen a locomotive in the shape of a man, and able to run without a track."

"Indeed!" replied Frank. "Allow me, then, to explain to you the mechanism of the New Steam Man."

With this, Frank proceeded to illustrate to the greasers the working of the famous invention.

They listened attentively and with deepest interest.

When Frank had concluded, they began a queer sort of jargon, and kept it up in an excited manner.

Frank could not very well understand it, as it was a dialect of the Spanish tongue.

But the ranchero seized Frank's arm now, and drew him toward the adobe building. The young inventor could not refuse.

CHAPTER III.

THE TREACHEROUS RANCHERO.

"You are my guest, senior," declared the ranchero. "I shall bewitch you with my wine. There is not better in the Laredo vineyards."

"Indeed, I am in your debt very deeply, senior," replied Frank, "but pardon me, but is not that good water in yonder spring?"

"It is; but first the wine."

"Very well; yet will you allow us to take some of it aboard the Steam Man?"

"Si, senior, with pleasure," replied the polite ranchero; "take all that you would care to of it."

Frank turned and motioned to Barney and Pomp.

They took the hint at once and moved the Man up to the spring.

In a few moments they had the hose out and were pumping the water with all haste into the Steam Man's boilers.

Frank with this followed the ranchero into the adobe building.

In the interior it was scarcely more inviting than outside, but the hospitable ranchero offered Frank a seat.

The young inventor accepted it.

It was a small chair near a window, through which Frank could easily see what was going on in the yard.

"Pardon, senior!" said the ranchero, affably, "but may we not exchange names? I am Don Juan de Casnova."

"And I am Frank Reade, Jr."

Frank was sure that the other gave a queer start and changed color a bit. But if so he was quickly recovered.

For smilingly he said:

"Senior Reade, I shall drink to your health."

Then from a closet near the ranchero produced a quaint old flagon and some silver drinking mugs.

Into this he poured some of the richest wine that Frank had ever seen.

"This is better than pulque, senior," declared Don Casnova with a smile. "Drink to success."

"Amen!" said Frank.

He took a draught of the wine. It was rich and gratifying to his taste.

He drained the glass.

"Another, senior," insisted Casnova.

Frank could not refuse. The wine warmed him and made him feel invigorating.

De Casnova seated himself opposite Frank and opened a conversation.

"Pardon my curiosity, senior," he said, politely, "but it is a nat-

ural question to ask the mission of one traveling across the country as you are. Is it a secret?"

Frank hesitated a moment.

His better sense told him the danger of making a confidant in this wild region.

Acting on impulse, he replied:

"I am out here in quest of a gold claim, near Los Pueblos."

"Caramba!" exclaimed the ranchero, with a start. "Is it a rich one?"

"It is so reported."

"I have heard of gold about Los Pueblos, but I have heretofore regarded it as a myth."

"It has been established a certain fact, I believe."

"Indeed! I should like to see that claim."

Frank was silent a moment.

There was a question uppermost in his mind which he desired strongly to ask the other.

But he was in doubt as to the safety of doing it.

Finally, after the conversation had turned upon different topics, he ventured to say:

"Pardon me, senior, but is there in these parts a man named Miguel Costello?"

The ranchero gave a start.

An odd, startled light came into his eyes. But he evinced trepidation only a moment.

"Si, senior," he replied; "I have heard of him."

"What sort of a man is he?"

It was a direct question, but Frank believed it the best under the circumstances. The ranchero idly puffed at his cheroot, and gazing at Frank languidly through half-shut eyes, replied:

"Well, senior, I think it not good taste to speak disparagingly of a man's character. Yet Miguel is so well known that it cannot hurt to tell the truth that he is a bad man."

"Indeed!"

"In fact, he is an outlaw, and if he had his just deserts would be hung for many a dark crime."

"Ah!" said Frank, quietly; "perhaps then you can tell me of the unfortunate American, Harvey Montaine, who it is said has fallen into his clutches?"

The ranchero smiled in a peculiar way as he replied slowly:

"Yes, I can tell you all about this affair, for I know Harvey Montaine."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Frank, unguardedly, "then he is a friend of yours?"

"Well, perhaps so. You know him yourself, I take it?"

"Yes," replied Frank, "he is a man of honor and of courage. Then the report is true that he was robbed of his claim by Costello?"

"I believe that he and Costello had an argument about a claim," replied Casnova, quietly; "to which it properly belonged I am not able to say."

"It belonged to Montaine," said Frank, decidedly.

"Ah, you know that then, do you?" asked the ranchero, quickly.

Frank's face flushed. He had spoken too quickly.

"I know that Montaine claimed to own a rich gold claim hereabouts," he declared, positively. "I have no reason to doubt his words."

"By no means, senior," replied Casnova, politely, "but you neglect the wine."

"I thank you," replied Frank. "I can drink no more."

"Allow me to insist, senior. It is a very fine quality."

"As fine as I ever tasted," declared Frank; "but I will not drink again."

De Casnova sat the mug down quietly. There was a queer gleam in his dark eyes as he said:

"Perhaps, senior, I can help you to rescue this Montaine from the villain, Costello. In fact, I have no doubt that I can."

"I have not intimated such to be my purpose," said Frank, steadily.

"Ah!" exclaimed the Mexican, lifting his eyebrows. "I see you will not trust me. But rest assured, Senior Reade, that Juan de Casnova is an honorable man."

"I know nothing to the contrary," replied Frank.

He was studying a way out of the difficulty.

He felt in some vague way that he was in a complicated position and wished to extricate himself.

He saw through the windows that Pomp and Barney had filled the Steam Man's boilers and were getting up steam.

Frank at that moment heartily wished himself aboard the Steam Man.

For some reason he felt a strong distrust of Casnova. He realized that he had committed an error in speaking of Montaine or of the Mexican bandit.

Frank knew enough of Mexicans to be aware of the fact that they were exceedingly treacherous and hung together famously.

For aught he knew Casnova was hand in glove with the bandit, and feeling that this was possible Frank's sensations can well be imagined.

He wished himself far from the spot at that moment.

Indeed, he had already begun to count the chances of reaching the Steam Man alive in case he should make a break.

Casnova's eyes were upon him intently all the while.

The villain seemed to read his purpose like a printed book.

"You will stop some days with us, Senior Reade," said the ranchero, smoothly. "You will find that a Mexican knows something of the art of entertaining."

"I am well aware of that now," replied Frank. "I will consult with my companions, and if they——"

But Casnova made a gesture of impatience.

"Senor need not do that," he exclaimed; "they are but peons. The senor is assuredly his own master."

"Yea," replied Frank, truthfully. "Yet I always confer with my two servitors. I will give you an answer."

Frank arose, but Casnova did the same and seemed loath to let his guest depart.

"Ah, too much haste," he declared, in his oily way. "Senor Reade, you know not the ways of these parts."

"I shall learn, perhaps," said Frank, dryly, taking a stride toward the door.

But before he could cross it the ranchero had seized a small whistle from his girdle and blew it.

Several sharp notes upon it he blew.

In the flash of a second Frank realized his peril. He made action in that same brief bit of time.

Quick as lightning he cleared the threshold and started across the yard for the Steam Man.

"Stop him!" yelled Casnova, in the Mexican tongue.

In the same moment six of the greasers sprang toward Frank.

The young inventor saw his peril and knew that he must act quickly.

He drew his revolver and cried:

"Stand back, every one of you! I'll kill the first man in my path."

But the greasers were upon him and the pistol was knocked from his grasp.

Only one thing favored Frank at that moment.

The greasers were all light men, and they had not reached Frank until he was within ten yards of the Steam Man.

Barney and Pomp in the cage saw the situation at a glance.

They realized the deadly peril and were quick to make action.

Barney seized a club and rushed from the cage.

It was but a couple of leaps he needed to take to bring him to Frank's side.

The young inventor himself had knocked over two of the greasers with his fists.

Barney now with his improvised shillelah descended upon the Mexicans like a thunderbolt.

They were utterly unable to stand up before such an attack.

Right and left the Celt dealt blows.

"Take that, an' that, ye murtherin' crew!" yelled Barney, excitedly; "bejabbers, if it's a ruction yez want, here's one fer yez."

The greasers went down before the Irishman's blows like logs.

There were others coming to their assistance. But before they could come up the struggle was over.

Barney and Frank had sprung into the cage. There they were safe from bullets.

And these now began to fly.

Casnova furiously rushed out into the ranch yard, urging his men on. A swarm of the greasers came for the Steam Man.

But Frank was not anxious to meet them in close combat.

He opened the throttle and let the Steam Man out.

Out of the ranch yard the Man sped, but the greasers all sprang upon their horses and gave pursuit.

Out upon the plain went the Steam Man, pursued by the yelling horde of greasers.

For half a mile the race was nip and tuck.

Ordinarily the Man would have distanced them, but there was but little steam up, and progress was slow.

As it was, the greasers gained a trifle, and one of them sent his lasso coiling like a serpent through the air.

It settled down over the Steam Man's head and shoulders.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PROSPECTORS.

THE Mexican who had the temerity to attempt lassoing the Steam Man had little idea of the enormity of his task.

The lariat, thrown with great precision, settled down accurately over the Man's head.

It reached his shoulders and there tightened.

At the moment, the Steam Man was going a thirty miles per hour gait. The effect was thrilling.

The greaser fancied that he could bring the Steam Man's career to an end, even as he would that of a wild steer.

But he had reckoned without his host this time.

The Steam Man kept straight on. The Mexican threw his horse upon its haunches, and the next moment expected to see the Steam Man topple over.

But an astonished cowboy was the order of the hour.

The lariat tightened like a whip-cord. The little mustang's forefeet were braced in the soft soil of the prairie.

For ten feet the mustang slid along as if on skates.

Then over on its side it went, the cowboy falling underneath.

The dead weight of the horse was pulled twenty-five feet, when the lariat snapped like a bit of thread.

The other greasers saw the act and were dismayed.

Not one of them ventured to throw a lariat after that.

Pomp and Barney nearly split their sides with laughter.

"Golly, but dat was jus' too funny fo' anyfin!" cried Pomp, hilariously. "Jes' flink ob dat fool ob a greaser who 'spected he could pull de Steam Man over."

Steam was now got up rapidly and the Man speedily left his pursuers far behind.

Across the plain at race-horse speed he went.

Soon the greasers were left out of sight in the rear.

It was certainly a narrow escape, and all had very good reasons to congratulate themselves on it.

The Steam Man kept on for a couple of hours at a fair rate of speed.

Then some high mountains began to loom up in front.

"I believe those are the Los Pueblos Mountains!" declared Frank, positively.

"Golly! dat am good!" cried Pomp.

"Bejabbers, thin we ought to be nigh the inemies' camp," remarked Barney.

"Yes," agreed Frank. "It is well for us to be on the lookout."

The region about them was of the most bare and arid sort.

To the southward there extended a literal desert, seemingly as wild as the famed Steppes of Tartary.

Every few steps the bones of some dead animal and occasionally a man were encountered.

It was in fact a plain of death. No living thing adorned it, and it was probably in time of great drought that many travelers had lost their lives here.

The Steam Man picked its way across the plain.

Soon broad mesas of some fertility were encountered.

Then a river was encountered, which was fortunately not so deep but that it could be easily waded.

Once on the other side the Steam Man made its way through a rocky pass and then a surprise was accorded the travelers.

Down through the pass there came the rumble of wheels and the heavy cracking of a whip.

Then around a curve shot a heavy mountain stage with six horses attached.

The driver, a burly fellow, with his belt filled with pistols, pulled up the horses with a volley of oaths.

"Thunder an' blazes!" he yelled. "Who in perdition are ye? What kind of a rig d'yer call that?"

The Jehu sat on his box staring at the Steam Man like one out of his senses.

Upon the box was a miner in red shirt and top boots, and upon the top of the coach were half a dozen more.

Within the coach were a number of Mexicans, a flashily dressed sport and a type of the genus gambler.

"A stage line!" exclaimed Frank, in amazement. "And in this out of the way place. Who'd have dreamed it?"

"Bejabbers, we must be comin' to some kind of a settlemint," cried Barney.

The pass was barely wide enough at this point to let the coach and the Steam Man pass.

But the coach did not offer to move, and Frank saw the passengers pulling their revolvers.

He comprehended the situation at a glance, and cried:

"Hold on, friends! there's no need of that. We are not road-agents!"

"Oh, ye ain't, eh?" thundered the burly Jehu. "Well, we're powerful glad to hear that. But whar in thunder did ye git that bullgine, anyhow?"

The passengers now all crowded out of the coach.

They were consumed with curiosity to inspect this new wonder.

"Instead of a steam engine!" cried one of the sports, "ye see, gentlemen, we now have a Steam Man."

"A Steam Man!" gasped several. "Well, if that don't beat me."

With much wonderment they proceeded to examine the Steam Man. Frank politely showed them the workings of the invention, and then, with some surprise, said:

"But how do we happen to find an American stage and American miners this side of the line?"

One of the sports gave a knowing wink and said:

"That's all right—there's a nice little claim over here that we've been up to see. We are from Saint's Repose, jest over the line into the States. In course this is Mexican land, but if ther greasers don't get onto us, we'll git some of that Mexican gold over into the United States afore many days, you bet!"

Frank was astonished.

"Are we then very near the line?" he asked.

"Not more than fifty miles."

This was most astounding information to Frank Reade, Jr.

He had already traveled a distance of full five hundred miles from Laredo.

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed. "If I had known that I would have traveled all the way on United States territory."

"Cert, stranger," was the reply, when Frank informed them of his course, "but then, for all that, ye came direct enough. The line bends in here, ye know, and ye've come along a north-westerly course."

"So it seems!" agreed Frank, "but are not these the Los Pueblos Mountains?"

"Cert."

"Well, how is it that you do not run across Miguel Costello and his gang?"

"Well, we have heerd tell of that chap a good deal. He hain't ever attacked us, though we've been lookin' for a scrimmage with him off an' on."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Frank, in amazement. "I think it very singular then, for I understand that he is the terror of this region."

"An' so he is, stranger. But we ain't goin' to be bluffed out of our claim for a stack of greasers as high as Shasta."

"That's good pluck."

"In course, but now ye've axed questions, stranger, s'posin' we take our turn. I'm Sam Sharp, or better known as Silver Sam. Who in thunder are you?"

Frank was not a little amused at being addressed in this bluff manner, but he quietly responded:

"I am Frank Reade, Jr., and I am from the East."

The sport turned around and indicated three of the others.

"That's Bill Guernsey, our driver," he said, referring to the Jehu; "this gent hyar," indicating a bloated gambler-looking man with a prodigious diamond on his shirt front, "is Mister Jake Bolton; we call him Diamond Jake fer short. This gent," indicating a tall, slender youth with a sleepy air, "is Mister Chris Blume, an' he's our civil an' minin' engineer. We're goin' to drive a shaft up there a mile or more an' he's goin' to do the biz for us."

"Gentlemen, I'm all very glad to meet you," said Frank, politely.

"The same, stranger," said Diamond Jake, advancing and shaking Frank's hand.

The others all advanced and did the same.

Silver Sam, as the sport was called, did not trouble to introduce the laborers, as the red-shirted men might have been called.

They were a conglomeration of Mexicans, half breeds and toughs.

"Well, friend," said Silver Sam, after the introduction was over, "what's yer biz in these parts, might I ax?"

"Certainly," replied Frank, "and perhaps you can give me some information to aid me?"

"Mebbe we can, stranger. We'll be glad to do it if we can."

"Did you ever hear of a man about here called Harvey Montaine?" Sharp exclamations went up and glances were exchanged.

"You can bet we have, stranger, and he's a white man, too."

"Harvey is a gentleman," said Frank.

"You bet he is. He was well liked in Saint's Repose."

"Where is he now?"

Silver Sam cleared his throat and came nearer.

"Look here, stranger," he said, earnestly, "are you lookin' for Harvey?"

"I am."

"Wall, I'm afraid ye'll never be able to rescue him. He's in the grip of that devil Costello."

"Ah!" said Frank, grimly. "That is what I heard."

"It's true enough. You see, Costello pounced down on him when he was opening up his claim and massacred all his men. They may have killed Harvey, too, but Costello keeps advertisin' for a ransom."

"The scoundrel!" exclaimed Frank.

"I'm thinking he ain' after that," said Silver Sam, with conviction, "no more nor you an' I are. It's my 'pinyun' he's got sick of being road agent and thinks there's a princely fortune in that mine."

"Well, is there not?"

"There ain't any doubt of it."

"Well," said Frank, slowly and with great determination, "I don't mind telling you, friends, that I am in this region to spoil his game and to rescue Harvey Montaine. I mean to do it—or die!"

"We glory in your pluck, stranger," cried Silver Sam, warmly.

"We hope ye'll succeed an' we'll help ye all we can."

"I thank you."

"One thing is sure. If Miguel Costello troubles us, we'll make it warm for him. We don't mean to give up our claim. But as he is twenty miles from here on another spur of the mountain—"

Silver Sam did not finish his speech. A thrilling thing happened at that moment.

There was a wild, blood-curdling laugh far up the gorge, and the next moment the crack of rifles smote upon the air.

Two of the red-shirted miners upon the top of the coach fell dead.

CHAPTER V.

BEATING A RETREAT.

Down into the defile there came a perfect swarm of armed men.

Rough looking wretches they were, all greasers and armed to the teeth.

It needed but a glance for any in the party to realize who and what they were.

"All aboard!" yelled Bill Guernsey, the stage driver. "Run fer yer lives, lads. There's no show fer us agin that pack of imps."

There was no doubt of this.

Costello's gang, for such they were, fairly swarmed in the defile.

There seemed a legion of them, and the numbers were too great for the party of miners.

Frank saw this at a glance and he turned the Steam Man about.

Barney and Pomp were instantly at the loopholes and giving the wretches a shower of bullets.

The party on the coach were firing, and a small sized battle was in progress.

But all clambered aboard the coach, and just in time Bill Guernsey cracked his long whip and sent his eight horses flying down the pass.

The Steam Man was far ahead making rapid time.

But Costello was determined not to be cheated so easily of his prey.

His murderous gang came thundering in pursuit. The greasers rode like fiends and kept up a constant fire.

Down through the pass went the Steam Man.

After it came the stage coach, and the passengers were yelling and firing with full force.

A short while later the Steam Man shot out upon the mesas.

The coach came after and across the plain the race went.

Of course the fleet ponies of the greasers could out-foot the stage horses.

The greasers came swarming up around the stage and it was possible that they would have annihilated the mining party but for an intervention.

Frank Reade, Jr., saw the danger and at once made action to prevent it.

He turned the Steam Man making a wide circle.

Then he started out to strike the foe on the flank.

The Man rushed with full force for the party of outlaws.

They did not swerve, and the next moment the Man was among them. The wheels of the wagon overturned horses, split the party up and raised havoc.

Men were trampled beneath the Man's iron feet. Horses were sent riderless over the plain and confusion ensued.

The Steam Man followed up his advantage closely.

Right and left the outlaws were scattered. Several times Barney drew a bead on a leader of the gang whom he fancied to be Costello, but each time missed.

The man seemed to bear a charmed life. The Celt was disgusted.

"Bejabers, I think I'll have to learn how to shoot," he muttered, disconsolately. "It's three times shure that I thried it an' each toime missed me mark."

The stage-coach meanwhile under Bill Guernsey's able guidance had gained a tremendous lead.

It seemed, indeed, well out of the race.

The greasers were completely scattered. The Steam Man went flying about the prairie picking them off by twos and threes.

Every shot fired from the cage was deadly.

In face of such a withering fire the greasers could not stand their ground.

They broke in wild confusion for the cover of the hills.

In the open the Steam Man was too much for them.

It could have whipped an army on a plain of good size, for it could easily keep out of the way while a most deadly fire was kept up.

In short, the Steam Man put to rout the entire party of greasers.

They fled in the wildest confusion to the cover of the hills.

But the Steam Man was all the while pounding at their heels.

In a very short time the plain was cleared.

The stage-coach was a speck upon the horizon line.

It was on its way to Saint's Repose, which Frank reckoned was a small mining town, of which there were many in the Rocky Mountains.

It was now a question as to what it was best to do.

Darkness was coming on and it would be necessary to find a camp somewhere.

Frank had thought of keeping on to Saint's Repose with the stage.

There he believed it would not be difficult to pick up a respectable force of men with which to attack the greasers in the hills.

Of course the Steam Man could whip them in the open.

But the greasers could stick to the hills and no efforts would serve to dislodge them.

It required no little thought and consideration upon Frank's part to decide what to do.

"Bejabers, av it was me," declared Barney, sententiously, "I'd jist go an up there meself alone and lave the naygur aboard the Steam Man."

"Golly! it am jes' as easy fo' yo' to stay dar as fo' me," spluttered Pomp. "You're a no count Irishman, anyway."

"Don't yez say that to me, naygur, or I'll spile the face av yez," retorted Barney, with mock earnestness.

"Huh! jes' yo' try it, I'ish. Yo'll hab yo' han's full in jes' a minnit."

"Begorra, I will thry it."

"Jes' cum right along."

Barney began to roll up his sleeves.

It was likely that the two rascals would have indulged in a friendly rough-and-tumble but for Frank.

"Come, this won't do," he said, sharply. "If you want to have any skylarking, you must wait for a better time."

Pomp made a grimace to Barney behind Frank's back, and Barney shook his fist at the dorky.

This ended the discussion.

Frank decided not to go to Saint's Repose.

It would have been a long run of fifty miles, and the result would have been extremely doubtful.

"My mission is to rescue Harvey Montaine," he decided, finally. "I don't care to wage war upon the greasers or anybody else for any other purpose."

So Frank remained out on the plain until nightfall.

Then he ran the Steam Man to the shores of a small lake and here, in a secluded spot, camp was made.

No fires were lit, as it was not deemed best to risk attracting the attention of the enemy.

The fires in the Steam Man were banked, and Pomp was elected to watch the first half of the night.

Then Barney and Frank laid down and went to sleep.

At midnight Barney was awakened and found Pomp ready to turn in.

The Irishman had been on watch an hour when his attention was attracted by a singular manifestation.

He could see the distant hill-tops against the sky.

Suddenly upon the tiptop of one of these a red light was seen to be burning.

It was fiery red and seemed to oscillate in an odd manner.

"That is very quare!" muttered the Celt. "I wondher phwat it is?"

The light remained in sight for several minutes describing various movements.

At times it described a circle, then moved up and down and again waved back and forth.

After the light disappeared Barney was pondering over the mystery when another light appeared upon a hill more to the eastward.

This described movements exactly like the other.

Then Barney's quick wit fathomed the secret.

"Bejabers, it's tilegraphin' back an' forth they are," he declared. "Och hone, now I wisht I cud rade whativver they be sayin'."

The Celt watched the lights with varying emotions.

After a time they disappeared altogether. Nothing more worthy of note occurred that night.

The next morning Barney related to Frank the details of the affair.

"Indeed!" exclaimed the young inventor. "That is an important cue. No doubt the hills upon which you saw the lights are near the den of Costello."

"Well, sor, I kin point thim out to yez," declared Barney.

This was done, and a note of their position made.

With the coming of another day Frank decided to make a cautious attempt to enter the hills with the Steam Man.

Accordingly, steam was got up and the Man was sent along at a rapid gait toward the southern spur of the range.

It required an hour to cross the plain at this point, it being quite a long ways.

But finally the Steam Man reached this part of the range, and fortunately it was found that the mountain side here was clear and the Man could scale it.

Frank started the Man up the incline, picking his way carefully.

Thus far nothing could be seen of the greasers.

If they were cognizant of the nearness of the Steam Man they did not show it.

What their game was Frank was not prepared to say, but he kept a sharp lookout, fearing treachery.

After climbing the mountain side for some time, the Man reached a spur, beyond which a good view of the interior country could be had.

Here Frank called a halt for a brief time.

With a glass he began to study the country beyond. In a few moments he gave an exclamation.

"I believe I have discovered the den of the greasers," he declared.

"Shure, yez don't mane it?" cried Barney.

"Yes, I do. Take the glass, Barney, and tell me what that object is against that part of an extinct crater over there. Would you not call it a building?"

Barney took the glass and studied the object.

None had keener or clearer vision than the Celt, and he said presently:

"Ye're roight, Misther Frank. It's a buildin', an' shure it's made av stone an' a roof of fir boughs. Shure there's a wide clearing about it, and on three sides at least there is a steep descint, bejabers, which no man livin' cud iver cloimb."

"I thought so," declared Frank, with gratification; "that will do, Barney."

The Irishman handed Frank the glass. The young inventor was just about to view the distant buildings again when a startled yell came from Pomp.

"Massy sabe us!" cried the terrified dorky. "We'se all goin' to kingdom come dis berry minute. Look out fo' dat big stun, Marse Frank—look out, everybody!"

Frank at that moment saw with horror what had caused Pomp's cry.

CHAPTER VI.

SILVER SAM RETURNS.

ENGROSSED in contemplation of the distant crater Barney and Frank had not heeded things in the near vicinity.

But Pomp, chancing to glance up the mountain side, saw a thrilling sight.

High up above their position was a mighty boulder of many tons weight.

And back of it he saw the forms of several men.

They were trying hard to start the huge boulder from its place. Their purpose was quite plain.

The boulder started on its career down the mountain, unless swerved in its course, would strike the Steam Man.

If struck by the tremendous weight little would be left of the machine.

"Golly sakes, Marse Frank!" cried Pomp, in utter horror. "Jus' yo' see dat trick of de greasers."

Frank did see it and for a moment was overwhelmed with horror.

Then he acted quickly.

"Give them a shot, boys!" he cried to Barney and Pomp, as he sprang to the dasher of the wagon.

The two servitors quickly obeyed.

The big stone was just tottering as their rifles cracked.

Several of the greasers were exposed and two of them fell.

Crack—ack!

Again the rifles spoke.

This time two more fell. But the big bowlder was coming.

Frank meanwhile had seized the brake and turned the Steam Man's course to the right.

He was not a moment too soon.

Down came the big stone like a whirlwind. The Steam Man escaped by the merest hair's breadth.

The stone passed so close to the cage that the wind nearly took Barney's breath away, he being on that side.

"Whurroo!" yelled the Irishman. "I niver see the bate av' that. Jist about the toime the stone got here shure it looked to be the soize av' a mountain."

"Golly, youse right dar, I'ish," cried Pomp.

But Frank had started the Steam Man right up the mountain side.

It was his purpose to rout the greasers out of their position.

But when he reached the spot they were not in sight.

They had disappeared over the other side of the mountain. As this was heavily wooded pursuit was out of the question.

The voyagers were much disappointed that they could not have driven the greasers to decisive battle.

The wily rascals, however, well knew that the result would be serious for them and acted accordingly.

The Steam Man now was upon the tip of the mountain spur.

A fine view was to be had of the whole mountain range.

They could now almost look down upon the greasers' stronghold.

The tall derricks used in excavating the mine shaft were to be plainly seen, and smoke rising above the trees suggested the presence of a steam engine of the stationary kind.

"It is evident that there lies the gold claim which rightfully belongs to Harvey Montaine," mused Frank. "I can understand now Senor Ravello's assertion that the position of the greasers was unassailable. Indeed, with a handful of men a small army could be held at bay here."

This had certainly the appearance of a logical fact.

One thing was sure, the greasers had guarded the approaches to their mine well and strongly.

Frank gazed reflectively at the distant camp and thought of Harvey Montaine presumably a prisoner there.

"We must effect his rescue in some manner," he muttered. "But how?"

Frank took a careful survey of the valley and the hills but he could see no way of reaching the greasers' camp.

Yet he felt sure that there was a way. How to find this was the problem.

However, nothing was to be gained by remaining in his present position.

It was plainly impossible to effect an entrance by that side of the mountain.

"What am we gwine to do, Marse Frank?" asked Pomp, after a time.

"Indeed, that is a hard question for me to answer," declared Frank.

"Bejabers, I think the best thing we kin do at all, at all, is to go back the way we cum," declared Barney.

Frank nodded his head.

"I declare, I believe you are right, Barney," he said. "Well, so be it."

The Steam Man was turned about and started down the mountain.

They had not proceeded more than one hundred yards, when the patter of bullets came against the cage.

Looking back, the travelers saw that the top of the mountain was covered with the greasers.

They had been in secure hiding near by all the while.

Had any of the travelers ventured to leave the cage while on the mountain, they would have been shot down instantly.

Barney and Pomp returned the fire with telling effect.

The bullets rattled against the impervious steel netting of the cage in a shower.

The greasers made the air ring with their defiant yells and cries.

But Frank kept on to the foot of the mountain.

A little while later the Steam Man was speeding over the plain.

The greasers did not pursue them.

They remained upon the mountain and were quickly lost to view.

Frank kept the Steam Man on a westerly course.

He had decided to cross to the opposite wall of the mountain range, with the hope of finding an entrance there.

In order to do this it was necessary to make a wide detour of fully forty miles.

But this was not much of a run for the Steam Man.

Frank pushed along at the steady rate of twenty miles per hour.

It was just sunset when the upper spur of the Los Pueblos range was rounded.

Then a trail was encountered.

It was broad and well beaten, and gave evidence of being much used.

Where it led to Frank could only guess, but he took it, as it led in the direction he wished to follow.

But before he had followed it far, a sharp cry escaped Pomp's lips.

"Look yender, Marse Frank! Whateber am dat?"

Frank looked in the direction indicated and experienced a thrill.

A long fringe of willows and sycamores marked the course of a stream not two miles distant.

In the verge of the sycamores smoke arose in twirling columns, evidence of a camp-fire.

Also forms could be seen moving about, and horses were seen to be grazing upon the plain.

"It is a camp," declared Frank, "but whether friend or foe I know not."

"Golly!" exclaimed Pomp, "does yo' s'pose it am dose people cum back agin wid Silver Sam?"

"It is not impossible," replied Frank, "and yet—look sharp, boys! Does not that look like Bill Guernsey's stage?"

Barney and Pomp both indulged in sharp cries.

"Dat's what it am, Marse Frank."

"Bejabers, that's so."

Frank at once sent the Steam Man forward at full speed.

Quick time was made across the plain for that two miles.

As they drew nearer the camp it was easy to see that it was the same party of prospectors under Silver Sam, only this time they were heavily reinforced.

Fully a hundred men of all types were gathered in the sycamore grove.

There were half-breeds and Texans, Irishmen, Frenchmen and Americans, all in a conglomerated mass. But there was not a greaser among them.

They were all men from various walks of life come West to seek a fortune in the mines.

As the Steam Man came up the tall form of Silver Sam was seen advancing.

The sport was evidently overjoyed to meet Frank again.

"Hello, friend!" he cried, cheerily. "Condemned glad to see ye! We're back agin, ye see, and we've got more men this time. We mean to paralyze those greasers or lose our scalps."

"I am glad to see you," said Frank, coming out of the cage. "Indeed, it looks as if you meant business."

"Yes, there's a hundred of us more or less. They say Costello has three times as many, but our boys mean business and ain't goin' to be backed down by greasers, you can bet."

"That's the talk, pard!" cried big Diamond Jake, as he came forward and shook hands with Frank.

"But we want to extend our thanks to ye for covering our retreat so nobly the other day," declared Silver Sam. "By Jericho! if it hadn't been for you we'd have been salted sure by them pizen greasers."

"If they will only attack the Steam Man in the open," said Frank, with a smile, "I think I can handle them easily."

"You bet! That's a wonderful machine you've got, friend. Wall, have you learned any news?"

Frank described his trip to the top of the mountain and what he had seen therefrom.

The prospectors listened with deep interest. Then Silver Sam said.

"Well, I reckon that's where poor Harvey Montaine is held a prisoner."

"I presume so," replied Frank.

"We oughter see him out of the scrape someway."

"That is my mission here," declared Frank.

"Good! We'll help ye, friend, all we can. Now let's go in and talk over a good move."

Diamond Jake and Silver Sam led the way into a tent which was pitched on the banks of the creek.

Frank found a seat upon a stump, and then the conversation began.

"Ye see," began Silver Sam, "we know well enough that Harvey has got a claim up there in the hills."

"Yes!"

"But we don't propose to meddle with his property at all. Our claim is on t'other side of the range. But we can't work it until we have done up Costello and his gang."

"Exactly," agreed Frank.

"Now the question is how shall we go to work to do that?"

There was a moment's silence. Then Diamond Jake spoke:

"I've a plan, pards!"

"What is it?"

"We kin split forces an' enter the hills by two ways. The Steam Man can stay down here on the level ground. When we have driven the greasers out of the hills the Steam Man can clinch the victory."

Diamond Jake's words were not without a good impression upon the listeners. But before they could be commented upon an uproar arose from without. All sprang up and rushed to the door of the tent.

CHAPTER VII.

THE COWBOYS' DUEL.

AMONG those who had joined the band of prospectors were two cowboys.

They were as genuine specimens of the prairie tough as one could rest eyes upon.

One was named "Copper Jake" and the other bore the euphonious title of "Buster Bill."

A number of miners had engaged in a game of dice.

The cowboys had finally ventured to take a hand.

Ordinarily the best of friends, it was hardly a moment before they were quarreling.

The "Buster" accused Copper Jake of using a weighted dice.

"You're a goldurned liar," exploded the Copper, savagely. "If ye don't take yer insinuation back, I'll salt ye."

"If ye think ye kin do it ye'd better try now," retorted the "Buster."

"By gosh! I will."

"Humph! Ye wouldn't hurt nobody."

"Ye called me a cheat."

"Wall, what of it?"

"Take it back."

"Naw, I won't."

"If ye don't, I swow I'll drag ye at ther heels of my pony."

"Ye can't do it."

"I'll bet yer a hundred I kin."

"Put up."

"Here's my dust."

In a twinkling the two desperate fellows had put up their stakes. They were held by one of the miners, and then the details of the affair were arranged.

Several of the miners were appointed to act as referees and judges, and then the cowboys went out and mounted their ponies.

It was at this juncture that Frank, Silver Sam and Diamond Jake came out of the tent.

With characteristic interest in anything savoring of sport, Silver Sam cried:

"What's up, boys?"

"Ther Buster and ther Copper have made a bet that one will drag t'other first at the heels of his hoss."

"I'll bet two to one on the Buster!" cried Silver Sam.

"I'll do the same!" cried Diamond Jake.

"Anybody take it?"

"I'll take ye."

"So will I."

The miners crowded forward with their money, and bets were made as free as water.

Frank watched the scene with the interest of one viewing a phase of life wholly peculiar to the region about.

The two cowboys had mounted and rode out upon the plain.

Each had in his hand a long and powerful lariat.

Each knew how to use it, and neither had a peer in the art.

It was an even contest.

How it would terminate only time would tell.

Out upon the plain the two cowboys rode. When well out they began to make a circle about each other.

Then the contest began.

First one would throw his lasso, and then the other.

High up into the air went the whirling cords. They would seem likely at any moment to settle about the cowboy's head and shoulders.

But the slightest movement, a touch of the knee against the well-trained ponies' sides, would cause the lariat to fall wide.

Hissing and curling through the air went the lariats again and again.

In vain each tried to outwit the other. It was a duel wholly without precedent, and fascinating to watch.

The "Buster" seemed to have the advantage for a time, but after awhile his pony seemed to tire.

Of course it was only a question of agility and endurance, and the end must come some time.

Suddenly the Buster's pony slipped, and quick as a flash Copper Jake's lasso went out.

It fairly sung its course through the air, and with accurate aim went down about the Buster's shoulders.

A quick jerk and the lasso tightened about the victim.

The next moment he went off his pony's back and was dragged a dozen feet upon the ground.

Then Copper Jake raised his broad-brimmed hat and waved it aloft. He had won.

He might have dragged his rival to death at his pony's heels.

But this he wisely refrained from doing. The crowd cheered, the Buster disentangled himself and rode into the camp much crestfallen and subdued.

Frank could not repress a smile at the result of the contest.

It was a contest wholly peculiar to Western life, seen in counter-part nowhere else upon the face of the earth.

Diamond Jake and Silver Sam were around cashing their bets in their order but soon returned to Frank's side.

"Excuse us, strangers," said Jake, with a grin. "P'raps seein' the Buster unhossed warn't quite so important as the bizness we were talkin' about, but you'll admit it was mighty interesting."

"Yes," agreed Frank. "It was extremely interesting, I will own."

Silver Sam came up now.

"Well, now that the scrap is over," he said, brusquely, "let's get to bizness."

"I am ready," said Frank.

"Good fer you. Then it's decided, is it, that we go up and try to rout out the gang? If we can drive 'em down onto the plain you'll look after 'em?"

"I will try to," said Frank. "When are you going to bring action?"

"To-morrow morning!"

"All right; I will try and do my part."

Frank went back to the Steam Man and narrated the plan to Barney and Pomp.

The two faithful servitors listened with the deepest of interest.

"A'right, Marse Frank," declared Pomp. "We'se jes' de chick-ens what can gib dose greasers a lickin'."

"Bejabers, we'll thry it," said Barney.

Nightfall was at hand, so it was decided to make camp upon the spot.

The prospectors had decided not to start upon their invasion of the greasers' stronghold until the next day.

Darkness settled down thickly over the plain.

It was near midnight before all was quiet in the camp.

As the prospectors had a picket line out, our travelers did not deem it necessary to set a watch.

So all turned in and sought slumber.

But Frank Reade, Jr., was utterly unable to sleep.

He tried in vain to woo the gentle goddess. A premonition of some mighty peril was upon him.

At length, as his nerves grew more acute, he decided to get up and walk in the air in the hope of inducing slumber in that way.

He did not arouse Barney and Pomp, and quietly left the wagon. He passed through the camp and came to the banks of the creek. Just as he reached this point he fancied that he saw shadowy forms moving a short distance out upon the prairie. Frank's vision was unusually keen. He became convinced, after a brief time, that he was right. It seemed as if the prairie in that direction literally swarmed with men.

They were creeping noiselessly along over the soft grass. A chill of terror seized Frank Reade, Jr.

He thought of the greasers.

Might it not be a band of them intent upon attacking the camp? The more he pondered upon the matter the more convinced he became that such was a fact.

But one thing puzzled him.

The prospectors had appointed a very strong picket guard. How had the greasers managed to pass them?

This was a question not easily determined at that moment.

It was possible that they had silently overpowered the picket, or that the latter had slept at his post.

In any event the enemy were creeping up to surprise the camp.

The realization came upon Frank Reade, Jr., with a force which for a moment seemed likely to overwhelm him.

"My soul!" he gasped. "They will be upon us before the alarm can be given!"

It was easy to foresee the effect of such a surprise upon the prospectors.

They would, no doubt, be cut down before they could really prepare themselves for the onslaught.

In that moment a dozen daring schemes flitted through the brain of the young inventor.

He thought of starting the Steam Man out amongst them with a view to breaking up their advance.

But the creek was between, and it would be some trouble to find a fording place.

Under the circumstances Frank executed the most sensible move that he could.

He stole quickly back into the camp.

It was but a moment's work to silently arouse Silver Sam and Diamond Jake.

He quickly explained the situation to them.

"Thunder an' blazes!" exploded Jake, "we must sound the alarm—"

"Easy," said Frank, quietly. "The first outcry raised will bring them down upon you. They are near at hand."

"What in thunder can we do, then?"

"There is only one safe thing to do, and there may be time yet to do it."

"What is it?"

"We must go and arouse each man one by one. Do it silently and don't let the foe hear a sound."

"Quick, then!" whispered Silver Sam. "Let's be about it."

The move was at once begun.

Of course there was a momentary likelihood that the greasers would attack the camp before it could be aroused.

But the alarm givers worked quickly and well.

From man to man they went silently and quickly.

The result was gratifying.

Each man upon being awakened, went to the cover of the sycamores and there waited for events.

In a very short time the whole camp was thus aroused and in readiness. The greasers would receive a hot welcome in their attack.

All was quiet about the prospectors' camp. Frank went back to the Steam Man and aroused Barney and Pomp.

The greasers for some reason seemed to be delaying the attack.

Every one of the miners was in the cover of the sycamores waiting for their Mexican foe.

Suddenly across the plain there came in a sharp, stern voice, in Spanish:

"Mexicans, up and at them! Spare not a life!"

Up from the prairie grass sprang a legion of forms.

They came on like a great wave and not a word was said until the creek was reached.

Then they broke the air with wild yells and dashed into the waters of the little stream, but they were destined to become the victims of surprise.

CHAPTER VIII.

INTO THE MOUNTAINS.

SUDDENLY Silver Sam's voice rang out:

"Now, boys! draw a bead on each man. Give it to 'em!"

There was a moment's silence, then the crash of firearms broke it. From the fringe of sycamores a line of flame leaped forth. The Mexicans fell in heaps in the waters of the creek.

Their surprise attack was turned upon them, and quickly proved the greatest surprise for themselves.

Once again the prospectors fired.

The effect was disastrous in the extreme to the greasers.

They made an attempt to cross the creek and fired a volley.

But it did little damage, and another volley from the prospectors turned the tide of battle.

Overwhelmed with the force of the attack, the greasers fell back. Frank sent the Steam Man close to the bank of the creek, and Barney and Pomp opened fire with their repeaters.

The greasers saw at once that their plan had failed, and they retreated in wild dismay.

Had it been daylight they might have been badly repulsed.

But in the darkness Silver Sam concluded that it would be folly and even dangerous to pursue them.

So this course was abandoned.

But the prospectors felt that they had gained an important victory, and their cheers rent the air.

The greasers disappeared, and did not make an appearance again that night.

Silver Sam was more than elated at the result.

"I tell ye, boys!" he cried, "we kin whip the whole gang of them, even if they are three to one."

"An' what's more, we'll do it!" cried Diamond Jake.

The prospectors cheered wildly at this announcement.

Daylight came at length.

The party were all glad to see it, for it would enable them to start at once upon their expedition into the hills.

As soon as possible, Silver Sam had all put in readiness for the start. Bill Guernsey and the stage were to carry a part of the company as far as the stage could go.

Then the others were to press forward on foot or horseback, as the exigency would demand.

At length the start was made.

The Steam Man accompanied the party as far as the pass which entered the hills.

Here the nature of the ground forbade its going further.

Had it not been for leaving the Man, Frank, Barney and Pomp all would have liked to accompany the party.

But as it was, the best thing that they could do was to remain upon the plain and wait for coming events.

The party were soon out of sight. Hours passed, and the Steam Man remained at the mouth of the pass.

Frank was not particularly charmed with the situation.

It was terribly monotonous waiting here in this idle manner.

Our travelers longed to be in action, to be doing something. But for the present, however, there was little or nothing to do but wait.

Hours passed by slowly.

Finally the day began to wane. Then Barney suddenly exclaimed:

"Wud yez listen! I can hear the crack av foire-arms."

The Celt was right.

Plainly enough to the hearing of all came the distant discharge of fire-arms.

This meant a great deal.

Without a doubt the prospectors had become engaged in battle with the greasers.

Frank listened in a fever of excitement. He would have given much to be upon the scene.

But this was impossible, for the rocky pass would not allow of the passage of the Steam Man.

"Whew!" exclaimed the young inventor, impatiently. "It seems terrible to be compelled to sit here and do nothing."

"I have it, sor!" cried Barney.

"What?"

"Shure, if yez will agree to it, we will leave the naygur in the Steam Man, an' you an' I will take a run up through there."

Frank turned to Pomp.

"How is it, Pomp?" he asked.

"It am jes' as yo' says, Marse Frank. Yo' jes' go right along fo' all ob dis chile."

"All right!" cried the young inventor, with inspiration. "Come along, Barney."

Both seized their Winchesters and left the Steam Man.

Striking into the pass they followed it for some ways.

They then came out upon a sort of tableland high up among the hills.

The sound of firing was now quite plain. But somewhat singularly, they were unable to locate it.

There existed in the place a strange sort of echo which carried the sound away into different quarters.

It was quite impossible for Barney and Frank to tell what direction to take.

So they finally struck out at random.

Leaving the tableland they skirted a part of the mountain wall.

Suddenly a startling thing occurred.

From a chaparral a score of greasers sprang out and surrounded them.

Revolvers were leveled at their heads, and the leader, a villainous looking fellow, exclaimed:

"Caramba! Move hand or foot and you're dead men!"

"Heavens!" gasped Frank, in dismay. "We are in for it, Barney."

"Bad luck to the omadhouns," muttered the Celt, in disgust.

In a twinkling the two prisoners were disarmed and their hands were bound behind them.

Then the Mexicans led them away into the chaparral.

After going some ways bandages were bound across their eyes.

Thus blindfolded they were led along for over an hour.

Then suddenly the buzz of voices came to their ears and the bandages were removed.

A startling scene was spread before Frank and Barney.

They were in a deep dell among the hills.

Tall, solemn-looking mountain pines overshadowed the place.

About them stood a line of armed men. The leader now advanced and said:

"We know you, señors. You have come here with your Steam Man to make war upon Miguel Costello. By his orders we now consign you to a living death. You shall feel the weight of Costello's vengeance."

Then he turned and waved his hands to his men.

Instantly two of them advanced and laid hands upon the prisoners.

And now Frank saw the mouth of a deep mining shaft before him.

Its ragged sides and the decayed beams showed that it had long been disused.

A chill of horror came over the young inventor.

"My God!" he reflected, "they mean to throw me down there."

It seemed at that moment as if he was doomed to an awful death.

But the leader of the greasers, who seemed to read his mind, said:

"Fear not, señor. We shall not relieve you of life in so summary a manner."

A rope was quickly wound about Frank's waist and then about Barney.

Both men were led to the mouth of the shaft and then the other end of the rope thrown over the windlass.

Several men operated the windlass, and Frank and Barney were swung into space over the mouth of the shaft.

It was a frightful moment for them.

What the distance was to the bottom of the shaft they could only guess.

It was in reality a thousand feet.

Down they were slowly lowered.

The windlass creaked above them, the light of day went out, and it seemed truly as if they were going out of the world forever.

A mocking voice came down the shaft.

"I hope you will find it pleasant down there, senors. Many good men have gone there before you, and you will find their bones. You can know your fate now. Nobody will ever find you down there, for the existence of this shaft is known to no one but Costello and his men."

Frank Reade, Jr., was ordinarily as brave as a lion.

But it seemed at that moment as if he must yield to despair.

"Death!" he muttered, with white lips. "Why should I fear it, and yet I cannot face it."

Poor Barney was beside himself with terror.

"Bad cess to the omadhouns!" he muttered. "I wud jest loike a chance fer to git a whack at them greasers wid a good shillelah. I'd vinture to clane out the lot av thim alone."

"You will hardly get the chance, Barney," said Frank, lugubriously. "I fear that we are done for."

"Bejabbers, thin, I'll cum back an' haunt the omadhouns, that I will!" cried Barney, angrily.

But now they reached the bottom of the pit.

Only a faint light could be seen overhead, and all was dense gloom.

Gradually, however, as their eyes became accustomed to the shadows, they were able to distinguish objects within reach.

No sooner had they struck the bottom of the shaft, than the rope came tumbling down after them.

What a terrible position was theirs!

One thousand feet below the earth's surface, at the bottom of a mining shaft.

They were literally buried alive.

Frank groaned in the bitterness of the realization.

"My soul!" he muttered, "this is the end of all. We shall never be rescued from here."

"But perhaps we can escape," ventured Barney.

"How?"

"Ah, that was the question and it was not an easy one to answer.

How could they hope to scale the smooth walls of that shaft?

It was plainly impossible. The thought was at once dismissed.

Frank suddenly recoiled with a cry of horror.

A bleaching skeleton lay at his feet. There were others near, remains of former victims.

This taught the two buried men plainer than words that it was useless to attempt the finding of another outlet to the labyrinth passages leading from the main shaft into the bowels of the earth.

Hope was abandoned and both sank down in mute despair.

They had but to await death. It was certain, inevitable, and the sooner it came the sooner they would be spared the suffering and misery of their awful fate, more awful than words can express.

CHAPTER IX.

POMP'S ADVENTURES.

POMP, left alone with the Steam Man, was in a by no means easy frame of mind.

The darky had a singular foreboding that no good would come of the expedition of Frank and Barney.

"I jes' finks dey oughter hab stayed yer," he muttered, "but, ob co'se, it was no manner ob use fo' me to tell Frank Reade, Jr., dat."

Time passed, and the darky looked anxiously for the return of his friends.

But, for reasons well known to the reader, they came not.

Finally the shadows of night began to settle down thick and fast, and Pomp grew very nervous.

"Golly, I jes' wish dey would hab some little respect fo' dis chile's feelin's an' come back," he muttered.

At length Pomp's attention was claimed by a thrilling sight.

Down the mountain side he suddenly saw two huge grizzlies advancing.

They had evidently sighted the Steam Man, and were coming directly for it.

Without doubt they were wondering in their bear minds what manner of intruder this was, and had come down the mountain to investigate.

Pomp watched them with some degree of interest.

He knew that he was safe enough in the cage and could do this with impunity. Therefore he chuckled to himself.

"I jes' fink dem b'ars fink dey am some big stuff," he muttered, "but dey am a flea bite 'longside ob de Steam Man."

In one sense this was true enough.

The Steam Man, however, hardly stood higher than one of the brutes, who was a perfect monster.

The bears came down the mountain boldly and straight toward the Steam Man.

Pomp watched them curiously.

One of them began sniffing the air and both came to a halt twenty feet distant.

For a moment they sniffed the air thus, then the largest rose upon his hind feet and let out a roar that made the air tremble.

Straight toward the Steam Man he came.

He was not five feet from the Steam Man when mischievous Pomp unable to restrain himself, pulled the whistle valve.

A terrific shriek went up on the air.

It was deafening in its force and the effect was ludicrous in the extreme.

The big grizzly fell backward as if shot and turned a complete somersault.

He rolled over and over in a heap and both bears went a safe distance up the mountain side.

There they paused and began to roar and growl furiously and tear up the ground with their claws.

Pomp nearly split his sides with laughter.

It was to him the funniest thing he had seen for many a day.

"Golly, I jes' reckon dat was one very much s'prised bear," he cried, hilariously. "I jes' fink he don' want no paht ob de Steam Man any more."

But in this surmise Pomp was wrong.

The two bears had again begun to advance down the mountain side.

They advanced cautiously, taking much time and sniffing the air suspiciously as before.

They took a detour, and both approached the Steam Man from the side.

Steadily, cautiously they approached. Again Pomp pulled the valve.

As the Steam Man's whistle went up on the air both bears went tumbling back somersaults.

They retreated some yards, but recovered and advanced again to the attack.

This time they manifested less fear to the whistle, standing their ground.

Pomp saw that the crisis had come, and he picked up his repeating rifle.

With quick aim he pulled the trigger. One of the bears received a bullet in the shoulder.

But the wound only brought a maddened roar from the brute.

Rearing upon its hind legs it made an attempt to rush upon the Steam Man.

Throwing its arms about the Man the bear proceeded to give him a hug.

But it was not of long duration.

The bear's teeth failed to penetrate the Man's iron armor, and the hot iron burned into the bear's flesh.

The air was instantly filled with the smoke and aroma of burning hair and bear meat.

With a howl of agony the bear recoiled and began scratching its belly furiously with its forward paws.

Angered, it dealt the Man a terrific blow, and Pomp saw that the crisis had come.

He threw another cartridge into the breech of his rifle and took aim.

The brute's eye was within range.

Pomp's aim was deadly, and the big brute went to the ground in a heap with a bullet in the brain.

The other grizzly seemed even more plucky than his mate.

He rushed upon the Steam Man and essayed to hug him.

But Pomp began to fear that some harm might be done the mechanism of the Man.

So he started the Man ahead a few feet, then took almost point-blank aim and drove a bullet into the bear's vitals.

The brute rolled over in the throes of death.

The contest was terminated then and there. Pomp was the victor.

The darky naturally felt a bit elated to think that he had slain two grizzlies with so little exertion.

"Sakes alibe, what will Marse Frank say to dat when he comes back?" muttered Pomp. "I fink he will hab dem critters' skins fo' his house in Readestown."

Pomp even thought of attempting to skin the bears himself.

But a fresh emergency at that moment claimed his attention and he was unable to do so.

In pulling the whistle valve of the Man it had not occurred to Pomp that any serious result could accrue therefrom.

But as it happened, it was the certain way of letting his foes know of his presence in the vicinity.

A roving party of the greasers, ten in number, had heard the whistle.

At once they decided to descend upon the invention and if possible capture it.

They bore down upon the spot full sail, and Pomp's first appraisal of their presence was in the shape of a loud shout as the party swung into view from behind the clump of trees below.

In an instant Pomp was at the dasher and the throttle rein.

He saw at a glance the deadly peril which threatened.

"Heavens!" he gasped. "I beliebe dat de rapsallions heerd dat ar whistle. I'd oughter know'd better."

The greasers saw that there was only one man aboard the Steam Man.

This was enough for them, and they made a full charge upon it.

Pomp saw that his only salvation was in retreat, so he swung the Man about and pulled wide the throttle.

The Man started to rush out upon the plain.

But the horses of the greasers were alongside, and one of them reached over and pulled the throttle rein.

In an instant the throttle was closed.

The Steam Man came to a halt.

He still held the rein, shouting to his comrades to board the wagon. Pomp pulled the cord in vain to reopen the throttle.

Finding he was unable to do this, he picked up a rifle and would have drawn a bead upon the fellow but for an incident which occurred to prevent.

The door of the cage was suddenly hurled open.

It had been left unlocked, and a greaser sprang into the wagon.

Another was behind him, but Pomp fired at the first one.

The bullet missed the fellow's skull.

"Caramba!" he gritted, rushing upon the darky.

The pistol was dashed from Pomp's grasp, and he was wrestling the next moment with his foe.

Pomp knew that it was a desperate situation, and he fought savagely.

But two more of the greasers were quickly in the wagon. In less time than it takes to tell it Pomp was overpowered. The darky was held firmly, while one of the greasers searched for a rope.

Finding it, Pomp was securely bound. The greasers seemed more than excited over their capture.

They jabbered and gesticulated in a very excited manner.

Poor Pomp was beside himself with chagrin and desperation.

"Sakes alibel!" he muttered, despairingly. "Whatebber will Marse Frank an' de oders say when dey come back an' don' fin' de Steam Man here any more?"

The ten greasers crowded about the Steam Man and began to examine it.

It was evident that they did not know how it worked for they did not attempt to operate it.

Pomp volunteered no information. At opportune moments he writhed in his bonds trying to break them.

The greasers in vain tried to discover the method of operating the Steam Man.

One of them did pull the throttle rein but it had got tangled about the indicator and did not open the valve.

They continued to gesticulate and jabber until long after dark.

At length, having seemingly failed to understand the mechanism of the Man, they made a peculiar move.

Pomp was bound hand and foot and left in the bottom of the wagon.

The captors then closed and secured the door in the cage and went away.

Pomp was much mystified at these proceedings. But he drew a natural inference in regard to them.

He concluded that the greasers had decided to go to camp and report their find and capture.

They would then return with a man who thoroughly understood working a steam engine.

Having decided that this was their move, Pomp at once began to exert himself to gain his freedom.

If he could succeed in doing so before they returned, he could turn the tables upon them cleverly.

With great exertions he worked away at his bonds.

Suddenly he got one wrist free. This was a life and he felt encouraged.

With one wrist freed, he went at once to work upon the lariat which bound his feet.

It was but a moment's work to reach for a knife in a locker near and sever the bonds.

Thus freed, he sprang upon his feet. The night was dark as pitch, but this did not matter to Pomp.

"Golly, I'll bet dey don' cotch dis chile dat way ag'in," he declared, sententiously.

Then he opened the throttle and sent the Steam Man flying out upon the plain.

CHAPTER X.

FUTILE ATTEMPTS AT ESCAPE.

In spite of the darkness Pomp kept on at a rapid pace.

He felt that the greater distance he put between him and the spot, the less chance there would be of falling into the greasers' hands again.

"Sakes alibel!" he muttered, "I jus' fink I keep my eyes open hereafter. Don' wan' nuffin' mo' to do wif dem greasers. I'll jes' wait fo' Marse Frank to come back."

But oh! had Pomp known the position of his master at that moment he would have been thrilled with horror.

Left alone at the bottom of the shaft, the sensations experienced by Frank and Barney were of the most despairing sort.

The air was foul and damp, and there were stagnant pools of water in places suggestive of diseases of horrible sort.

The companionship of the skeletons of former victims was not of the pleasantest.

Crawling into the driest places of the mine passages, Frank and Barney sank down quite overcome.

"Well, Barney," said the young inventor, ruefully, "this is rather a bad outlook for us."

"Bejabbers, I should say so," exclaimed the Celt in despair. "Shure I'm thinkin' we'll be after dyin' in this place."

"I fear so."

"But shure there's no sure thing but that rescue might cum yet."

"It is hardly likely."

"But it might, Misther Frank."

"It might, but I have no belief that it will. We have only Pomp to search for us, and he would never find this shaft. Even if he found it he would never suspect that we were at the bottom of it."

There was logic in this.

Their case seemed certainly a hopeless and dreary one.

There seemed nothing left to them but calm resignation to their fate.

But the indefatigable Barney would not give up.

"Shure, I wish I cud foind a way to cloimb out av the place," he muttered.

He crawled to the mouth of the shaft and looked up.

As he did so an exclamation escaped his lips.

It was at sight of a passage leading out of the pit and into the bowels of the earth at a point some thirty feet above.

It was presumably an upper level of the mine.

This discovery brought Frank to the spot.

It required some careful study in the gloom to decide whether this really was a passage or not.

It looked like a dark patch against the side of the shaft.

But finally the two prisoners decided that it was the passage of an upper level.

With this discovery came the thought that by it escape might be made from the mine.

It was a forlorn hope, yet the prisoners embraced it fervidly.

"But how will we get up there?" asked Frank. "I can't see how it is to be done myself."

"Bejabbers, that's so," said Barney, ruefully. "Shure, it's a bit av a ways up there. Av I was to sthand on yure shoulders, shure I cudn't reach it."

"No," replied Frank.

Then his eye caught sight of the rope which had been thrown into the pit after them.

He picked it up.

Just over the passage of the upper level a cross beam was visible.

"Here, Barney!" said Frank, handing the rope to the Celt. "You have learned the trick of throwing the lasso."

The Celt's eyes danced.

"Shure an' I have that, Misther Frank!" he cried. "An' I've not forgotten it either."

Barney coiled the long rope carefully and made a turn about a small stone to give it increased weight.

Then he steadied himself and flung it up into the air.

Up, up it went, uncurling as it rose and high above the beam.

But the next moment it came tumbling again down into the pit.

"I missed it that toime," said Barney, in disgust, "but I'll not do that again ye may be shure."

Once again Barney made the cast.

This time the rope went over the beam.

The stone tied to its end brought the rope down to the ground again. Barney quickly knotted the ends together and cried:

"Shure it's all roight now, Misther Frank, and shall I be the first to go an' up?"

"If you wish, Barney."

The Celt went hand over hand up the rope.

He had served his time on shipboard and well knew how to go up a rope.

In a few moments he had reached the cross beam and swung himself over into the passage.

"Come on up, Misther Frank," he cried. "Shure I'll steady the rope."

"All right, Barney."

Frank was an adept in climbing a rope himself.

In a very few moments he had reached the beam above and was quickly by Barney's side.

"Here we are," he declared. "Now for business. First, let us see where this passage can go to."

"All right, sor."

Frank led the way into the passage.

Fortunately he had not been deprived of his pocket lantern when captured by the greasers.

This he now lighted and then the darkness of the place was quickly dispelled.

It was seen that the passage extended many feet into the earth.

They followed it for what seemed fully one hundred feet.

Here it came to a termination. A blank wall of earth and quartz ledge was before them.

There was no doubt but that the miners had once followed a vein of quartz through this passage, and had reached what they believed to be its termination here.

The result of this dampening discovery upon Barney and Frank was disheartening in the extreme.

"No chance," said Frank, gloomily. "We are in for it, Barney."

"Bejabbers, that's so, Misther Frank," acknowledged the Celt. "Yet, on me wcrud, I hate to give it up."

"So do I," agreed Frank. "But what can we do?"

"Shure, I don't know."

The pocket lantern burned brightly and illumined the passage.

There was plainly no way to go further. To attempt to dig a way out would be the height of folly.

A horrible death by starvation seemed to be inevitable.

It was much drier and cleaner however in this passage than at the bottom of the pit. So it was decided to remain here.

"We are thirty feet nearer the surface," said Frank. "Oh, if there was only some way to go the rest of the way."

"Bejabbers, I'm not sure but there is," cried Barney, as he picked up the rope. "Av yez only remember there's beams acrost the shaft at intervals all the way up."

"Yes, but they are beyond our reach."

"Shure, mebbe I cud get the rope over thim in some way or other."

The Celt started for the mouth of the passage imbued with this wild hope.

Frank lighted the way with the pocket lantern.

In a few moments they had reached the mouth of the passage, and Barney measured the distance to the beam above.

It was not more than twenty feet.

"Whurroo!" he cried, exultantly. "I tell yez I kin jest do it an' don't ye ferget it. Luk out fer ye'self."

Balancing himself upon the beam at the mouth of the passage Barney made a throw with the coil of rope.

It passed over the upper beam and came down so that the Celt could grasp the other end of it.

With a cry of triumph he made the two ends fast.

"Shure, Misther Frank!" cried the brave Irishman, "whin I reach the mouth av the shaft I'll let the rope down an' draw yez up."

Frank's heart leaped with a wild thrill of hope.

It was not impossible that Barney might succeed in his enterprise.

It was a frightful distance to overcome, but the Celt had full confidence and any amount of pluck.

Up he went, hand over hand upon the rope.

He stood upon the beam above a moment later.

Frank shot the rays of the lantern up through the darkness of the shaft.

Barney had overcome over fifty feet of the thousand. But it was hard to say what obstacles might not be before him.

Yet the plucky Irishman realized that any chance of the sort was better than lying down to die at the bottom of the shaft.

"Whurroo! Misther Frank!" he cried, with exultation. "Shure, I'm makin' out foiney. There's another beam jist over me head."

Frank murmured an inward prayer for the success of his faithful servitor.

But a moment later all the hopeful plans were dashed.

An end of the rope came tumbling down. A moment later Barney came down and swung into the passage.

"Shure, Misther Frank, it's the ind av us!" he said, dismally.

"What?" cried Frank, "couldn't you go any further?"

"I cudn't, Misther Frank. Shure the nixt beam was more nor eighty feet above me head an' I cudn't throw the rope over it no-how."

The last straw seemed to have given way.

Death in its most hideous form certainly seemed to confront the two prisoners.

A groan of despair escaped Frank's lips. He covered his face with his hands.

"I am not a coward," he said, earnestly, "but truly, Barney, it seems hard, indeed, to die in this manner."

"Shure it's all av that, Misther Frank," said the brave Celt. "Av it was not so far, I think we cud dig our way out av the place."

With an instinctive feeling that this might be possible, they retreated to the far end of the passage.

But the sober reflection that there were many hundred feet of earth between them and the outer air, and that they had no tools to dig with, dispersed this theory like mist.

Both sank down on the ground, overcome with despair.

Frank's head was near the wall of the passage, and suddenly he experienced a strange thrill.

An odd sound came from beyond the wall of the passage.

It was not far distant, either, and as the young inventor listened, he heard very distinctly the ring of pick-axes and the low hum of voices.

It was an astounding discovery, and caused him to apply his ear closely to the passage wall.

CHAPTER XI.

INTO THE GREASERS' DEN.

THERE was no disputing the fact.

The sounds which came to Frank's hearing were plain and unmistakable.

The ring of pickaxes was quite audible, and could not have been twenty feet distant through the wall of earth.

The young inventor was dazed with the force of this realization.

Barney had heard the sounds also, and both sat silently gazing at each other.

What did it mean?

Startling queries and theories flashed through the minds of each. Was some one coming to their rescue through the earth? Or was it all a delusion?

The former theory was at once dispelled. If any friends knew of their presence there they would scarcely go to the trouble of rescuing them by means of digging through a thousand feet of earth.

A few moments' pulling at the mouth of the shaft would have brought them both out of their difficulty.

As for the latter possibility it was at once dismissed.

"Begorra, Misther Frank," said Barney, in a mystified way, "phwativer do yez call that?"

"Somebody is digging their way toward us," said Frank.

"Shure yez don't suppose it is fairies?" whispered the superstitious Celt.

"Nonsense!"

Frank had hit upon what he believed to be the truth in his own mind.

It had occurred to him that the greasers were conducting mining operations in these hills.

Might it not be that in their shaft sinking they had followed a vein dangerously near the old shaft?

In fact, it was not impossible that in a few hours they might not dig their way actually through into the old mine.

The thought gave Frank a deep thrill of hope.

"Barney," he said, earnestly, "upon my soul, I believe that we are bound to make our escape."

"Shure, Misther Frank, phwat do yez mean?" cried Barney, in surprise.

"Hush! let us wait and watch."

For some time the two prisoners listened to the sounds of the pick-axes, and the voices of the workmen could almost be distinguished.

Suddenly, however, the sounds ceased.

All was quiet beyond the wall of earth.

What did it mean?

Without doubt the miners had ceased work.

Then Frank recollected the hour, and that without doubt they had retired for the purpose of gaining sleep.

With an inspiration the young inventor sprang up.

"Barney!" he cried. "Our time has come!"

The Celt was astonished.

"Shure, phwat do yez mean, Misther Frank?"

"I mean that we must dig our way through and meet that passage. It will be deserted, and though it will lead us into the camp of the greasers, we will stand a chance to escape."

Barney caught the inspiration.

"Bejabers, ye're right!" he cried. "But how will we do it? Shure, we aven't any pick nor shovel."

"Somewhere in this mine there must be some old ones!" cried Frank. "Let us search."

"It will likely be in the ould mine below, sor."

"All right."

"Shall we go down, sor?"

"Yes."

Barney quickly adjusted the rope and slid down into the old shaft. Frank followed him.

Then with the pocket lantern they began an exploration of the place, and with most gratifying results.

In one corner they found part of an old spade and an iron bar.

The bar could be used in lieu of a pickaxe. They quickly returned to the upper level.

First making sure that they were not likely to be heard, work was begun.

Frank wielded the bar and Barney the shovel.

For hours they kept at work in a lively manner.

A deep hole had been excavated.

They had made a distance of full fifteen feet into the solid earth.

Frank guessed from the hollow sounds that they were now not many feet from the inner mine.

His theory proved correct.

In less than twenty minutes later his bar went through the wall of earth and he lost it.

But, fortunately, with the shovel they were able to enlarge the aperture sufficiently to enable him to pass through.

Barney followed quickly.

They were now in the new mine.

All was darkness, but Frank cautiously opened the slide of his lantern.

The tools of the miners lay about, but none of the latter were in sight.

The coast was clear apparently, and they moved forward, not, however, without great caution.

The passage seemed to extend a great ways through the earth. They followed it for what seemed a good while and yet there was presented no sign of the main shaft.

"That is curious!" exclaimed Frank, in surprise. "There certainly is a main shaft somewhere. We must soon find it."

"Begorra, maybe there's none at all," said Barney, logically. "Perhaps it leads into some koind av a cave or the loikes."

There was more in Barney's remark of a pertinent sort than seemed at the moment likely.

Suddenly Frank came to a stop.

"Goodness gracious!" he exclaimed. "What does that mean?"

"Pwhat?" asked Barney.

"Why, don't you see?"

"Begorra, it's a loight."

"Certainly."

Far down the passage the faint gleam of light was seen.

It was not daylight as the prisoners well knew at that hour.

They paused and watched it intently for some time.

At first Frank had been inclined to believe it a lantern carried by some of the greasers, who were coming back into the mine to work.

But a few moments' study convinced him that this was not so.

"That is at the end of this passage," he declared. "Come on, Barney. Let's get out of here as quickly as possible."

They pressed forward at a rapid pace.

Every moment the light grew larger and plainer.

Then Frank saw that it occupied the whole size of the passage

and at once understood that it was a chamber beyond illuminated.

This theory was borne out perfectly well, when, a few moments later, they came to the mouth of the passage.

A wonderful scene was spread before them.

They came out upon a sort of circular gallery about a deep amphitheater which lay below them.

The passage was only one of many leading into this gallery, and there were other galleries of similar sort.

It was far from being a new mine, as Frank saw at a glance.

Indeed, it might have been older than the mine they had just escaped from.

The light which illuminated the amphitheater, which was of large dimensions, was created by a large pitchwood fire burning in the center of the mine floor below.

Frank looked up and saw patches of the night sky through apertures in the roof of the mine, which was not far above their heads.

The fact was, a cave had originally occupied the spot and the galleries and passages had been added by man.

It was certainly a wonderful spectacle. The floor was full fifty feet below, and as our adventurers looked down from the gallery they saw a large number of the greasers lounging about the place.

Many were rolled in blankets and sound asleep.

Others were playing dice or talking and smoking their cheroots, and the hum of conversation came upon the air.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Frank, with a thrill, "I tell you, Barney, we have found the den of Costello and his gang."

"Begorra, that's thue," agreed Barney.

"It is certainly a place well suited for the purpose."

"I should say so, sor. But however will we get out of here?"

"That is a question."

"Shure, sor, I think we'd better get out as soon as possible."

"Right you are, Barney. If those miners return and discover our escape from the shaft they will be quickly after us."

"Shure enough, sor."

"Let us move cautiously along and see where this gallery goes to."

Frank led the way along the gallery.

It terminated in a flight of steps cut in solid rock.

There were none of the greasers, apparently, in any of the galleries or passages above the floor.

So Frank felt safe in descending these steps.

He went down them until a gallery below was reached.

They were now quite near to the floor. Frank and Barney here paused.

It was, of course, decidedly unsafe to venture down within the circle of the firelight.

"If they would only all go to sleep," said the young inventor, "then we could be sure of slipping by them."

But the greasers seemed to have no such idea in view.

There was no doubt but that many of them would remain up all night. What was to be done?

Frank pondered the question seriously and long.

He saw what he believed was the passage which led out of the mine.

But men were constantly passing in and out, and it would be utterly impossible to escape in that direction.

Meanwhile, the risk was great in staying where they were.

At any moment some one of the greasers might come upon them. It was clear that desperate action had got to be taken at once.

Frank considered every daring move which he could think of.

He even thought of a break for liberty through the outer passage. But second thought showed that this was suicidal.

But he noted that there was a line of shadow under the galleries. Perhaps by keeping in this he could find another outward passage.

It was a terrible risk to take, but Frank did not hesitate.

"Come, Barney!" he said, "let us go down below."

The Celt, without a word, followed Frank. But they had not descended three steps when the young inventor came to a startled halt.

A thrilled exclamation escaped his lips.

CHAPTER XII.

THE PURSUIT UNDERGROUND.

"HEAVENS!" he gasped. "We cannot go down now. Back for your life, Barney."

The Celt, who would have followed his master anywhere, obeyed this command.

Back up the stairs they sprang.

They were just in time.

Two of the Mexicans came up the stone steps into the gallery.

They paused by the landing and stood for some time engaged in conversation.

Of course while they should remain there the way was blocked for Frank and Barney.

The two fugitives were dismayed.

They knew that at any moment the miners might return to their work and then their escape from the old shaft would be discovered.

Even as this fear was upon them, Frank heard a commotion in the gallery above.

A loud cry in the Mexican tongue came down from above.

The effect was startling.

Instantly the greasers below sprang up with loud cries, and made a rush for the galleries.

Frank turned to Barney.

The truth had burst upon him with horrible force.

"My God!" he gasped. "We are lost, Barney. They have discovered our escape!"

"Begorra, that's thrue enough," agreed the Celt. "Phwat shall we do, sor?"

For a moment Frank was in a quandary.

But there was no time to lose.

The Mexicans were swarming up into the galleries.

To retreat into the shaft from which they had emerged would be folly.

But where else could they go?

It was a serious question.

There was no time to lose.

Suddenly, at that moment, Frank saw a narrow opening in the gallery wall.

He rushed into it and found that he was in one of the many passages which made a honeycomb of the hill.

All was darkness, but the young inventor did not care for this, so long as safety was assured.

Barney was close behind.

They were just in time to avoid being seen by the foe.

Fortunately not one of the Mexicans turned into this passage.

"Thank Heaven, we have given them the slip for a moment," Frank breathed.

"Bejabers, I've an ideal!" exclaimed Barney, with eagerness.

"Indeed!" said Frank. "What is it, Barney?"

"Shure, sor, let us stay here by the opening. Pretty quick the blathershites will all be gone by. Shure, thin, we kin slip out av here, an' p'raps foinde our way out through the main passage. Do yez see?"

"There is logic in your plan, Barney," declared Frank. "I think we will try it."

Accordingly the two fugitives waited for their pursuers to pass.

Soon they were heard in the upper gallery, and it seemed as if the coast was clear.

"Bejabers, now's our toime," cried Barney.

"All right," agreed Frank. "Let us try the game."

"Will yez lead the way, and I'll folly, if it is to perdition?"

"I will."

Frank crept out into the gallery.

He cast a glance up the gallery and saw nobody.

But as he looked in the other direction he was given a mighty thrill of horror and dismay.

There, not twenty feet below, stood half a dozen of the greasers. They blocked the passage, and what was worse at that moment, they saw Frank Reade, Jr., and gave a yell of discovery.

It was echoed in the gallery above, and then exciting scenes followed.

Frank darted back into the passage.

He was not a moment too quick.

The crack of rifles was heard, and bullets flattened against the gallery wall.

"My soul! we are discovered!" he cried, wildly. "Come, Barney, we must follow this passage somewhere—anywhere."

"That's the devil's luck!" cried Barney, in dismay. "But sure, sir, I'm wid yez foriver. We'll give the omadhouns the slip yet, or me name ain't O'Shea."

Into the passage they darted.

The sounds of pursuit came in their rear.

All was dense blackness in the shaft and they were obliged to rush on blindly.

Lights were seen in their rear, and at times it seemed as if their pursuers must surely overtake them.

But Frank was possessed of a deadly resolution.

He knew that if he was caught it would be certain death.

Of course in the darkness there was imminent danger at any moment of falling into some dangerous pit or hole.

But the young inventor preferred such a fate to certain capture. Barney kept at his heels closely.

Thus they rushed on at full speed.

Every moment new passages were encountered. Frank adopted the tactics of dodging into every one he could come to and keeping to the right.

In this way he had soon distanced his pursuers.

The sounds of pursuit died out in the rear.

Satisfied of their safety for the moment they came to a halt.

Both were quite exhausted, and Barney was particularly so. The Celt flung himself flat upon the floor of the cavern.

"Och hone, Misther Frank," he cried, in a panting manner, "shure, it's all done out I am wid the exertion av the run. But we've distanced the devils anyhow."

"That's true," agreed Frank, "but in my opinion we are a long ways from being out of the scrape."

"Shure, that's right."

"I've no idea where we are or how we'll ever get out of this place."

"Bejabers, I'm sthuck intoirely meself an that."

"But I still cling to a hope that we will yet get out of here all right."

"I hope so, sor."

"Of course the greasers are familiar with the passages in this mine."

"Yis, sor."

"They probably will make a very thorough search. In that case they will be likely to run us down."

"Shure, I fear that, sor."

Lying upon the hard floor of the shaft the two fugitives listened fearfully for sounds of the pursuit.

But none came, and after awhile they felt a renewal of hope.

But to remain where they were was out of the question.

Where to go or what to do was a problem.

Finally Frank decided that the best move was to cautiously work their way if possible back to the main body of the mine.

But in the fearful darkness this did not seem likely to be an easy bit of work.

One passage could not be told from another.

Yet Frank decided upon this as the only feasible move.

He went in advance and Barney followed slowly.

In this manner they crept along in a cautious way. What seemed an age passed, when a startling incident occurred.

Suddenly Frank heard a muffled voice in what seemed like a long distance away.

"Misther Frank! Shure, where have yez gone?"

"Barney!" cried Frank, in surprise, "where are you?"

"Shure, I don't know, sor."

"Well, that is odd!" exclaimed the young inventor, with a laugh, in spite of the possible seriousness of the situation. "How did you get there?"

"I don't know that, sor."

Frank was puzzled.

The voice of the Celt seemed to be within a few yards of him, and yet was dull and muffled.

It occurred to Frank of a sudden that Barney had wandered into a parallel passage and was now opposite him, beyond a thick wall of stone.

Satisfied of this, Frank said:

"I thought you were right behind me, Barney."

"Shure, so I was."

"But you are in another passage. You must have deviated back here a ways."

"Very loikely, sor. Pwhat shall I do about it?"

"Why, go back, of course, and get into the right passage and come along with me."

"All right, sor."

"Be sure and take the first turn to the right. Then keep straight along the wall until you reach me."

"Will yez wait, sor?"

"Of course I will."

"All roight. Here goes thin."

Frank heard a distant shuffling sound and then all was still.

What seemed like an age passed.

Barney did not appear.

Frank listened in vain for some sound of his approach.

All was tomb-like stillness.

"Well," muttered the young inventor, "that is queer."

Finally Frank raised his voice and shouted:

"Barney! Where are you?"

Again and again he shouted.

No answer came back. Now Frank was really alarmed. Cold perspiration burst out upon him.

"My soul!" he gasped. "It cannot be that he is lost."

Fearful that this was the case Frank lost no time, but started to retrace his steps.

He kept carefully and closely to the wall of the passage and at intervals shouted loudly.

But each time no answer came.

Only the dull, muffled echoes. It was certainly an alarming matter.

Frank did not credit any assumption that Barney had fallen into the hands of the greasers.

He reckoned, correctly enough, that the Celt had been misled further away into other passages and was lost.

Indeed, the mine was a veritable labyrinth, akin to the fabled one of Crete.

Frank was not sure that he would ever find his way out of the place, and was oppressed with dismay.

On for some distance he went.

It was easy enough to follow the passage wall.

It seemed certain that it must sooner or later bring him into the one in which Barney had gone astray.

But the darkness was so very thick that any course was rendered deceptive.

It was almost impossible to tell, with any degree of certainty, just where any one would come up. For that matter, it would be easy to keep up a perpetual circuit until death from sheer exhaustion should come to end the struggle. It was a situation not without grim terrors.

CHAPTER XIII.

A STRUGGLE IN THE DARK.

THE further Frank went along the cavern wall, the more fearful he became that he would not be able to find Barney again.

This was most dismaying and the young inventor's heart sank.

But he set his lips firmly.

"I must find him," he muttered, resolutely. "Separation will be fatal."

In vain he called.

No answer came back.

The Celt, wherever he was, was certainly beyond hearing.

In this quandary and a state of mind most indescribable, Frank strove to make his way along in the darkness.

He kept on, at intervals shouting for his companion.

But ever that same oppressive death-like stillness reigned.

Finally Frank was forced to abandon all hope of finding Barney.

He next turned his attention to the problem of finding his way out of the place himself.

Once he should succeed in doing this and in joining his friends there was no doubt but that he could devise a way to return and make a successful quest for Barney.

With this resolution uppermost in his breast he kept on.

Suddenly a strange sound burst upon his hearing.

It was a distant sound like the mumbling of voices and gave Frank a queer thrill of comprehension.

In an instant he realized that he had reached a point in close proximity to those who were searching for him.

With this belief Frank cautiously came to a halt.

As he did so he heard a slight crunching noise in his rear.

Involuntarily he turned about.

The next moment he felt a clutch upon his shoulder and then talon fingers closed about his windpipe.

Not a word did his assailant speak. Who or what he was Frank could only conjecture.

Naturally he believed him to be one of the greasers.

But if this was the case, somewhat singularly the fellow made no effort to cry out for his companions.

His purpose seemed to overcome Frank without an outcry.

But the young inventor had no idea of submitting without a struggle.

He grappled with him and a struggle followed which baffles description.

Backward and forward they swayed and reeled. Now one held the advantage and now the other.

In this manner the struggle continued for some time.

In vain Frank tried to throw his adversary.

"Who are you?" he finally panted, nigh overcome with exertion.

"That's nothin' to you," grunted the other, huskily. "I'm after yer scalp an' I'm goin' ter have it."

"Not if I can prevent," retorted Frank.

"Ye can't help yerself."

"Perhaps not."

"Ye'd better give in at onct. If ye'll surrender now I'll spare yer life an' take ye down to Costello."

"I have no intention of surrendering to you."

"Ye don't, eh?"

"No."

"Curse ye, then I'll kill ye!"

"If you can."

"Wall, I kin."

"Look here!" said Frank, sharply. "I want to know what sort of a chap you are. I can tell by your talk that you are not a greaser."

The fellow laughed.

"In course I ain't," he replied. "But what of that?"

"Well, you must be a miserable wretch to mix up with them."

"That's nothin' to you."

"Of course not. Yet I would give one of my own countrymen credit for better sense than that."

"Wall, I don't ax any odds of you nor nobody else. Let go of my wrist or I'll stick this knife atwixt yer ribs."

"I have no idea of it."

"Ye haven't, eh?"

"No."

"Wall, I'll show ye."

With a curse the villain strove to carry out his threat; but Frank hung on to his grip well.

Backward and forward they swayed in a severe test of muscular strength.

Frank Reade, Jr., was not a heavy man, but extremely quick and muscular. He managed to hold his own.

Suddenly voices were heard in the distance, and lights flashed.

Frank knew at once that the greasers were coming that way, and he understood well the result.

If they should come up while in struggle thus, his fate would be sealed.

They would no doubt kill him on the spot.

This filled him with desperate resolution, and he made a reckless attempt to end the struggle then and there.

Exerting all his strength, he swung his adversary against the wall of the passage.

With such force did the villain strike the wall that he was for a moment stunned.

It was Frank's chance.

Quick as a flash he severed his hold with the foe and darted away in the darkness.

When the fellow recovered an instant later, his would-be victim was missing.

His wrath is not easily depicted in words or with the pen.

Yelling oaths and fierce imprecations he started in pursuit.

But Frank had got a good start, and went flying down the dark shaft like a meteor.

On he kept at full speed, taking the chances of falling into a hole.

In a few moments he had distanced his pursuer. He came to a halt somewhat out of breath.

There was no doubt but that the villain had taken another corridor and was far astray.

The lights and the sound of voices had disappeared.

For the nonce Frank knew that he was safe, and he felt relieved.

He sank down upon the damp floor of the mine passage to recover his breath and strength.

Every muscle in his body was aching from his experience with the villain.

It had been a hard tussle and he came off victorious only at a great expense of muscular power.

For some moments Frank rested in this manner.

Then he once more regained his feet.

He knew the great importance of escaping from the place. He thought of Barney, and at that moment a singular sound came to his hearing.

It was like the yawn of a waking person. The next moment a familiar voice in a muttering key broke the air:

"Bejabbers, I've been ashleep, an' more's the shame to me. Phwat-iver will Misther Frank think whin I tell him of it? But shure I was that tired I could niver kape me eyes open at all, at all."

Frank gave a start of joy.

How familiar were those tones to him. It was Barney.

Impulsively he cried:

"Hullo, Barney! Thank Heaven we are reunited."

"Misther Frank!" cried the Celt, with wildest joy. "Shure is that yez, sor?"

"It's nobody else."

"Begorra, I'm that glad to see yez that I cud sthand on me head."

The next moment the faithful Celt was by Frank's side, wringing his hand.

That was an affectionate meeting between master and servant.

One was scarcely less glad than the other. Both were overjoyed.

Then they recounted experiences.

It seemed that Barney had wandered into another passage and completely lost his way.

The thickness of the separate walls had prevented Frank's voice from reaching him or his voice from reaching Frank.

However, they had been brought together again by good fortune.

It was now determined not to get into another such a scrape.

"Bejabbers, I'll kape close enough to yez now, Misther Frank," declared Barney, vigorously. "Not a minnit will I lave yez, shure."

"It will be the safest way," agreed Frank. "We will have to look sharp to avoid the foe. Ah!"

The exclamation was caused by the distant flashing of a light.

"They are coming this way," cried Frank, hurriedly.

"Shure ye're right sor."

"We must get out of the way."

"Begorra, it's roight yez are."

"Come on!"

"I'll folly yez, sor."

Frank darted into another passage and Barney followed him.

Suddenly, as they were forging along, light was seen ahead.

"What is it?" cried Frank. "As I live I believe it is daylight!"

"Bejabbers, sor, it's not the roight color for that!" cried Barney.

"I guess you're right."

"Shure, it's back into the main mine we be comin', sor."

It was certainly a fact that at last they had found their way into a passage leading into the main body of the mine.

Imbued with new hope, Frank kept on at a rapid pace.

Soon the light grew stronger, and they became certain that they were coming back to the very point they had started from.

Nearer every moment they drew to the entrance to the shaft.

Nothing was seen or heard of the greasers now. They were doubtless exploring the passages yet in pursuit of the fugitives.

"Shure, it's a nice slip we gave them intoirely," declared Barney, with a chuckle.

"You are right," agreed Frank. "Now, if fortune favors us we will be able to escape from this den."

"Shure, I hope so, sor."

At length they reached the end of the passage and once more came out into the gallery of the mine.

There were none of the greasers in the gallery, but venturing to look down into the pit below Frank saw that there were fully as many of them yet gathered about the fire.

It was now a serious question as to what it was best to do.

To attempt to pass through the main part of the mine unobserved was utterly out of the question.

They would be sure to be spotted by the foe, but Frank had decided upon a move and started to creep along down the gallery, when a startling thing occurred.

Frank heard a rasping sound almost at his shoulder and then a whisper came, shrill and clear:

"Whist! are you friends to me?"

Frank turned with utter amazement.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE END.

SET in the wall of the gallery was a door heavily barred with iron. A white face was pressed against it, and as Frank looked up he barely repressed a loud cry of amazement.

"Heavens!" he gasped, "Harvey Montaine!"

"My soul!" came back in a thrilled whisper. "Is that you Frank Reade, Jr.?"

"It is nobody else."

"God be praised!"

"I have found you."

"My prayers are answered."

"But I fear we are in as bad a position as you," said Frank.

"How so?" asked Montaine.

"We are alone and unaided here. We escaped into this place from an old shaft near here into which we had been cast to die."

"Heaven is with you!" cried Montaine, feverishly. "The Almighty has sent you to effect my rescue. Oh, Frank, I cannot tell you what I have suffered in the last month."

"You have my sympathy," replied Frank, warmly. "And if it lies within my power I mean to wrest you from the power of Miguel Costello."

"Then you got my message asking for succor?"

"I did."

"I knew that you would answer it."

"Of course I would. I can imagine what you have suffered, dear friend. But this fiend—Costello—what was his purpose?"

"Partly revenge, and partly a scheme to defraud me of my legal claim to the mine."

"Is this the mine?"

"Oh, no; the claim is a richer one and a full two miles from here. This is an old, disused Spanish mine, worked by the early Spaniards."

"Ah! then this is simply a rendezvous for the greasers?"

"Exactly."

"But Costello—does he spend most of his time here?"

"I think he is sinking a shaft at my mine. He comes here only to taunt and deride me in my helplessness."

"The scoundrel!" exclaimed Frank; "but how are we to get you out of there?"

"Oh, Heaven help you to succeed!" exclaimed the prisoner. "These bars are too strong to break. But I think it is a simple matter to raise the barriers which are below. There is no lock, and no key is used. Simply steel bars are shot into their sockets. They should be easily opened from the outside."

"Of course," replied Frank, eagerly. "It is as you say. Have patience for a brief moment, and you shall come out of your cell."

It required but a few moments' work for Frank to lift the bars, and then the cell door swung back. Montaine came staggering out.

He was a tall, finely formed man with an intelligent cast of features.

He was but a trifle older than Frank, and much after his type. The two friends embraced warmly.

"Oh, God, you cannot know what a joy it is to be relieved from that cursed cell," said Montaine, fervidly. "It is like entering upon an entirely new life."

"I can imagine it well," replied Frank, "but the danger is not over. We are still in the lion's den."

"Right, my friend," said Montaine. "But we must find a way out."

He went to the railing of the gallery and looked over.

There was a light of despair in his fine eyes as he turned back.

"Ah, I fear that we will never see daylight again," he whispered, hopelessly. "There is but one entrance to this place that I know of and that is securely guarded as you see."

"But we must find a way to escape," said Frank.

The words, however, had barely left his lips when a thrilling thing occurred.

Up the stone steps came the sound of feet.

Three of the greasers suddenly appeared not ten feet below. They saw the escaped prisoners and a cry of alarm escaped their lips.

"My soul! we are lost!" cried Montaine.

But Frank Reade, Jr., was seized with a mighty desperation.

Weapons they had none, save the shovel and the iron bar which they had brought with them from the old shaft.

But Frank raised the bar and hurled it with all his might at the foe.

It struck one of the greasers fair across the breast.

He went down like a shot.

The other greasers retreated, giving yells of alarm.

Frank recovered the iron bar and Montaine secured a couple of pistols from the fallen greaser.

The heroic little trio meant to die game if the foe should venture up the stairway again.

But they did not.

Circumstances occurred to prevent this contingency. Loud shouts went up from below, and great excitement seemed to ensue.

Then the distant exchange of rifle shots was heard.

Frank exchanged startled glances with Montaine, and a sudden inspiration seized him.

"My soul!" he cried. "Do you believe it possible that Silver Sam and his men have whipped the greasers and have penetrated to this place?"

"Beggona, there's a fight goin' on out there phwativer it manes!" cried Barney.

"Yes, and a hot one," added Montaine.

This was true.

"FRANK READE, JR., WITH HIS NEW STEAM MAN CHASING A GANG OF 'RUSTLERS,' OR, WILD ADVENTURES IN MONTANA."

The report of rifle shots were now rapid and near at hand. The yells and cries of the contestants could be plainly heard.

The amphitheater had been cleared of greasers in a twinkling.

It seemed to the prisoners a good opportunity to make an attempt to escape.

So they rushed down into the place, but scarcely had their feet touched the cavern floor when half a dozen armed men burst into the cavern.

At first Frank thought they might be some of the greasers returned, and consequently foes.

But a loud cry of joy went up the next moment.

"Hooray!" shouted a hearty voice, "however did you come here, Mr. Reade?"

It was Silver Sam and five of the hardy miners in his employ.

"We are saved!" cried Frank, joyfully. "Your men have the best of it, Sam?"

"Cert," replied the sport, readily. "We scattered them like chaff. Oh, I tell ye, one good man can whip three greasers any time."

It was the truth.

The prospectors had given the greasers a tremendous defeat. Miguel Costello fell at the head of his men.

After his fall, the band became demoralized and was easily broken up.

The mine and the whole mountain was quickly in the possession of the miners.

Montaine was surrounded by a legion of his friends.

Frank Reade, Jr., turned to Barney and said:

"Our mission is ended, Barney. Now let us return to Readestown the quickest way."

"All right, Misther Frank. I suppose the fust thing is to find the naygur and the Steam Man."

"Yes, if Pomp is still in the place where we left him all will be well."

But at that hour it was not deemed safe to venture down the mountain side.

But daylight was close at hand and they decided to wait for it.

A sort of jubilee was held in the old Spanish mine that night.

The miners celebrated their victory in royal good shape.

Harvey Montaine was in high spirits.

He gripped Frank's hand warmly, saying:

"I can never fully repay you, Frank, old friend. But for you I might never have seen daylight again."

"I was glad to be able to help you," said Frank, sincerely.

"I knew that you would do it, so I sent for you. The time may come when I can return the favor."

"Do not speak of it," said Frank, warmly. "It is all right."

"I have a very rich claim upon the other side of the mountain. I shall make a large fortune out of it."

"I hope you will."

"You shall see that I will not forget you, old friend."

When daylight came not a greaser was to be found in the hills.

The gang was thoroughly broken up with the death of Costello, and they dispersed to the settlements a hundred miles south.

No further trouble in working the gold claims was to be apprehended.

The prospectors from Saint's Repose at once staked out their claims and began to sink a shaft.

Harvey Montaine had no trouble in finding plenty of men who were willing to take hold with him in opening up his own claim.

His predictions proved true, and he eventually reaped a large fortune from his claim.

Frank and Barney were escorted down the pass to the place where they had left Pomp and the Steam Man by Silver Sam, Diamond Jake and a party of the prospectors.

Pomp, as we have seen in a preceding chapter, had released himself from his bonds after being captured by the greasers, had got aboard the Steam Man and taken to the plain for safety.

All that night he kept on the move in the vicinity, taking care to guard against a second surprise.

But he was not attacked again, and some time after daylight he ventured to return to the spot where Barney and Frank upon returning would expect to find him.

He had hardly done so when they appeared accompanied by Silver Sam and his crowd.

Of course an exchange of experiences followed and then Frank and Barney boarded the Steam Man.

"Three cheers for Frank Reade, Jr., and the Steam Man, boys," cried Silver Sam, heartily.

They were given with a will. Frank replied with several sharp notes from the whistle and then the Man was off.

Soon the Los Pueblos Mountains faded away in the distance.

For days the Steam Man kept on over wide plains until at length Laredo was reached again. Then once more the Steam Man was put aboard the cars.

The great quest was ended.

Harvey Montaine did not forget the favor done him, for two years later he sent Frank's wife a valuable solitaire diamond worth many thousand of dollars from the mines of South America.

And so ends the story of hot work among the greasers, but it does not conclude the experiences of the Steam Man, a further account of which may be found in No. 6, of the FRANK READE LIBRARY, entitled:

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